

Captive Desire

Kathleen
Victor

Neither war nor her
stubborn pride could
destroy the love
they shared.

Kathleen

She looked at him, the entire sinewy, taut length of him, as she had never dared to look before, when he gathered himself out of the kettles and stood to towel himself dry. He saw the look, and the towel faltered in its rubbing.

"Your shirt." He stretched a hand toward where the oversized shirt, hastily cinched, was sliding away from her shoulder.

But it was the smooth skin of her shoulder his fingers closed on, not the coarse fabric. She could not tell if the sharp intake of breath she heard was his or hers, but every part of her was suddenly, pulsingly alive.

"By God," he said in a croak that was scarcely more than a whisper. "I vowed I wouldn't. But either you take to your heels this instant or..."

Her hand closed over his and she lifted her face to him. Her other hand tugged open the loosened knot at her waist and let her sash fall where it would as he drew her against him.

Together, they sank onto the buffalo robe, oblivious to its patches of dampness. Joshua's mouth was warm now and mobile, and for the first time ever, Bethany surrendered herself willingly and without reservation.

And for the first time ever, lovemaking was sweet beyond anything she had dreamed.

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PLAYBOY
PAPERBACKS

CAPTIVE DESIRE

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To
T. V. OLSEN
the original Joshua Stark

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I. BOSTON

Chapter I

Sunshine bathed the new leaves of the elms, sparkled on the surface of the Frog Pond, and warmed all of Boston Common in tones of springtime green. No such radiance glowed beneath the brim of Bethany Herbert's bonnet, however, as she dipped a hand into the cloth bag held by her companion and tossed a scatter of bread crumbs in an arc at their feet. In grave silence, the two girls watched a trio of pigeons advance, bobbing and murmuring, to peck at the offering.

"Let's not say good-bye today," Bethany said suddenly. "You're not leaving for Albany until the day after tomorrow, are you? Why don't I run in tomorrow to say good-bye? Maybe for just a few minutes after tea?"

Rachel Page—until five weeks ago, Rachel Bidwell—tilted her head, considering, then shook it regretfully. "It will be worse tomorrow. We won't have a moment of peace together. Aunt is in such a turmoil, packing every last thing I might need, and she will be that way right down to the instant we climb aboard the coach." A smile touched her lips. "Lyle says he is sure I won't be homesick for at least a month after we reach Fort Dearborn because I will be busy all that while just unpacking my trunks."

"I doubt I should be homesick even if I were transported to China." Bethany's parasol made an emphatic dip that sent the pigeons fluttering upward and back in alarm. She kept her eyes averted from the direction of Beacon Hill, where the wink of sunlight on the State House's gold dome was a reminder of the imposing mansions of brick and gleaming white that also overlooked the Common. "But then, I don't have a home to be sick for anymore."

"I do wish you were coming with us," Rachel said. "All the while Lyle and I were off on our wedding trip I was almost sure your father would give in and let you come. It would mean so much to me to have you with us away out there in

the wilderness. It's not all that dangerous living on an army post, and Lyle says Chicago is something of a real settlement around the fort."

"I know," Bethany said, although she knew no more of the matter than what she had heard from Rachel, whose knowledge all came from her young lieutenant husband—and he had never been that far west himself. "I think I could have persuaded my father if it weren't for Christiana."

"Christiana?" Rachel halted in the midst of digging into the bag for another handful of crumbs to entice the pigeons. "But I should think Christiana would favor the idea. I should think she would be as pleased to have you gone as you would be to go."

"It pleases Christiana more to drive a wedge between me and Father in any way she can. It pleases her to thwart my smallest wish." A pink crept into Bethany's cheeks that was more than a reflection of the sun on the salmon-pink silk scarf she had used to tie on her pert green bonnet. "I declare, if I were a boy, I believe I would run off to France and join Napoleon."

"Now that would be an act to put you back in your father's good graces, wouldn't it? A staunch British sympathizer like him," Rachel chided, but she giggled, too. "I suppose you would also vote Republican, against the Federalists, and tell him you admire Mr. Jefferson enormously and wish to become exactly the sort of person Mr. Madison is."

Bethany could not repress a giggle either. She was only seventeen, after all, and life did have its ludicrous side. "Father calls Mr. Madison 'that little man in the palace.' He won't even speak his name."

Bethany linked an arm through Rachel's, and they resumed their casual stroll across the Common, Rachel dribbling a trail of crumbs for the pigeons and gazing about her at the water, the trees, and the other strollers as if she might never set eyes on them again. Bethany, taller and more slender, glanced at her friend in sympathy. Yet her own trials seemed a far heavier weight to bear than Rachel's simple sadness at bidding farewell to a beloved home, which was offset by the excitement of moving on to a life of new adventure with an attentive and handsome young husband.

Death had claimed Bethany's mother after a long and

painful illness when Bethany was thirteen. In the years that followed, Bethany had assumed the role of mistress of her father's house, guided both ably and indulgently by Mistress Willoughby, the housekeeper. Then, last summer, Mr. Herbert had returned from an extended business trip to Quebec, bringing with him Christiana—dark-eyed, English-born, silken-voiced—as his bride.

There was no question in Christiana's mind as to who was to be mistress of the Herbert house, and within a week of her arrival there could be none in the mind of anyone else, either. One after another, the servants who had looked to Bethany for their orders, some of whom had been part of the household for years, were replaced by new people of Christiana's choosing. Bethany had made tentative protests at first, all of them fruitless. Beaming and tender, Mr. Herbert deferred to Christiana in everything she said or did, and Christiana was always ready with a sweet smile for him and an unruffled explanation of her actions—often to the effect that Bethany was too inexperienced to properly judge the qualities of a truly good servant. When Mistress Willoughby had ventured to join Bethany's louder protests against discharging Jane Cooper, the cook, Mistress Willoughby herself had been coolly dismissed from service, and that same evening Mr. Herbert had summoned Bethany to the library, where he had charged her with being willfully arrogant, contrary, and spiteful to her stepmother. He would hear no defense from Bethany, but had warned her in tones he had never before used to her that he would not tolerate Christiana's receiving any further distress on any grounds from his ungrateful daughter.

Emerging from that interview, Bethany had not missed the glimmer of triumph in the lustrous eyes Christiana lifted to her; nor was she intended to. From that moment on, the war between them had been silently declared and the battle lines drawn.

"Have you thought of marrying?" Rachel broke in on Bethany's musings. "You would be mistress of your own home then, and not have to bother about Christiana."

"I've thought of it," Bethany admitted, "but one has to be asked. It is not as simple a thing as ordering a new gown."

"Well . . ." Rachel paused to poke at an early dandelion with the toe of a dainty kid slipper. "What about Jonathon

Harris, for example? You rather favored him, I thought, and he certainly finds you fetching. I was sure he would have spoken by now."

"He came calling one day this winter when I was in bed with a cold. Christiana entertained him. He has not been back since."

"Oh, Bethany, no! She wouldn't! Why would she?" Rachel was aghast.

Bethany spread her hands. "I don't know. Not why nor what nor how. I just know that any affair of mine goes wrong as soon as she takes an interest in it." She flounced away from Rachel in an angry whirl of pink skirts, but checked herself on the brink of a puddle left by the previous night's rain. Two long breaths brought her chin up, and the maddening sense of frustration was under control.

"It doesn't matter," she said, returning to pace again at Rachel's side. "I mean, about Jonathon. Because I'll tell you what I do know: when I marry, it will be a man I can twist around my finger exactly as she does my father." Bethany lifted her left hand, which held her parasol, and extended one of the slender fingers that protruded from her silk mitt. "Exactly like that," she said, gyrating the finger in tight little circles.

"No, Bethany, don't. Promise me you won't choose like that. It would be so dreadful—worse than you can guess." Rachel nearly dropped the bag of bread crumbs in her distress.

"Why?" Bethany challenged.

"It's different, being married. Different from what we used to think it might be. It's . . ." Color was deepening in Rachel's face, bringing fire clear to the roots of her dark hair.

Bethany's anger was forgotten in a wave of eager curiosity. "How different? What do you mean?"

There was only one aspect of marriage they had ever truly discussed, speculating on it in whispers and half whispers and giggles. They had hoped for greater enlightenment from the talk Rachel had had with her aunt before the wedding, but the report Rachel had passed on to Bethany behind a shielding hand had been disappointing if not surprising, considering that Susan Bidwell, who had raised Rachel from babyhood, was a lifelong spinster and liked it that way. She had advised Rachel that it was the duty of a good wife to endure in

patience whatever would be the will of her husband as prompted by his nature as a man.

"I mean—well—marriage is only partly how we supposed. That is"—Rachel hung her head and swallowed, but forged on gamely—"a husband who couldn't make up his own mind, or always asked permission for things or—or if he waited always on your decision . . . It would be dreadful."

They had come to a standstill on the path, facing each other, so engrossed in their conversation that neither of them heard the thud of approaching hooves or what might have been a hail directed at them.

"Do you endure?" Bethany asked. "Or . . ." It was her turn to go scarlet, but she wanted to know. "Do you ever, sometimes, like it?"

"Oh, you!" Rachel's embarrassed giggle slid into a squeal of alarm as her eyes shifted away from her friend's. She leaped aside and pulled Bethany from the path with her.

In the same instant a rider on a tall horse swept by them, swerving to the grass on the far side of the path and sending up a shower of muddy water as he splashed through a puddle. He reined the horse around some distance beyond the girls and halted.

"You ladies aren't hurt, are you?" The question was courteous enough, but the eyes that looked down at them from the shadow of heavy black brows flashed annoyance rather than concern. They were blue eyes, so startlingly blue in the lean, weather-browned face that the color was an affront in itself.

"No, not hurt, thank you," Rachel answered in a small voice. She had gone white upon seeing their danger, but now the hot color flooded up into her face again.

Bethany felt her own cheeks flaming. The man could not possibly have overheard their conversation, yet she was as disquieted as though she had been caught spying through a keyhole. Her indignation flared.

"But you can scarcely say we have come to no harm, thanks to you, sir." She spread her skirts for a better view of the mud-soaked ruin of pink lutestring, white silk stocking, and pink slipper.

"You can thank me you're not flat on your face in the mire," he said. "I'd advise you to confine your gossiping to

a sitting room henceforth and resist the temptation to take root on the public paths like a pair of graven images."

His hand touched the brim of his tall beaver in a gesture as ungracious as the rest of his manner. He wheeled his horse and rode off without another word.

"Why, he didn't even apologize," Rachel said, staring after him. Lamely she added, "Of course, it's true we were at fault."

"No more than he," Bethany declared. "I wish we had chosen to ride out today instead of walking. I would soon show him who is a graven image."

"True. And break your neck in the process. You scare me to death sometimes, the way you ride." Rachel again slipped her arm through Bethany's. "We will be saying good-bye in too short a time as it is, but at least we can do it in one piece."

Bethany shot a final baleful glance after the stranger, then once more allowed herself to be turned and drawn on along the path. They would not let some boor of an outlander—his accent betrayed the fact that he was not a product of Boston—do worse damage by spoiling what time they had left together.

But he had spoiled it all the same. Bethany cast about in vain for a means of resuming their conversation where it had been broken off. She would dearly love to know what secrets Rachel had been on the verge of revealing; it was hateful to be ignorant of things nearly everybody else appeared to know.

The mood in which confidences were easy to exchange had dissolved in the spray of muddy water, however, and it would not return. She and Rachel spoke rather of how Bethany's maid might clean away mud stains on silk, of the canary-yellow carriage upholstered in red velvet that Rachel's cousin Samuel had just acquired, and of the afternoon years ago that Bethany and Rachel had spent under the amused but firm supervision of Bethany's mother, blotting up an ink stain on Bethany's apron with what had seemed like gallons of milk.

"It will be four years ago tomorrow that she died," Bethany said, her tone carefully unrevealing.

"Your mother?" Rachel was instantly sympathetic and contrite. "I didn't realize! Forgive me. I've been so wrapped up in my own affairs—"

Bethany dismissed the need for apology with a shake of her

head. "My father knows what day it is, and so does Christiana. I spoke of it at supper the other night. But Christiana is giving a dinner party this evening in honor of her cousin just the same, and my father hasn't lifted one finger to stop it."

Rachel's hand sought Bethany's and squeezed in wordless understanding. "Major Ainsley himself can't be to blame, though, I'm sure," she suggested. "I thought him extremely charming when I met him today. For a British officer, that is. It struck me he was very eager to please you."

A lift of Bethany's shoulders shook off the sly hint. If her laugh was a trifle self-conscious it was also quite spontaneous. "Perhaps the truth is that you are partial to any officer, British or American. I'll grant he does seem very nice, but I hardly know him. He's been here scarcely more than a week. And he *is* Christiana's kin."

That was truly the rub. There was no denying the charm of Francis Ainsley, whose hair was more blond than her own and whose smile set her pulse beating in double time. He had a liking that was more than politeness for things that she liked—horses and kittens and bright flower gardens—and when he told tales of his adventures to a room full of people, one glance from his smoke-gray eyes could make her feel as if he were speaking for her benefit only. Yet he was Christiana's cousin, blood of her blood, and for Bethany that was a strong counterforce against the pull of his magnetism. Major Ainsley would have to prove himself far more positively than he had so far before she would confess even to Rachel that he had been the inspiration of her just-before-sleep fantasies more than once that week.

There was no time left for confessions, anyway. Their wanderings had brought them to the edge of the Common, where the moment of parting could be put off no longer.

Rachel's wide brown eyes filled with tears. "I can't say good-bye, either. Do come over tomorrow. We'll find a few minutes for ourselves. I promise."

They exchanged a quick hug and more promises as a wagon rattled by on the cobbled street. Then Rachel was hurrying along Tremont Street to meet her husband, and Bethany was retracing her steps toward the Herbert home on Beacon Hill.

More than ever Bethany resented the thought of the eve-

ning's party ahead. It was as if she were being compelled not only to make light of the eve of her mother's death but to ignore the sadness of losing her best friend as well. Without Rachel close by who would she have to confide in? She would not put it past Christiana to have taken that loss into account in the scheduling of her party.

The mud on Bethany's ankles was beginning to cake. She bent and brushed off as much as she could, regretting again that she had not been on horseback to show the blue-eyed man in the beaver hat a thing or two about horsemanship. She could have done it, too, despite Rachel's misgivings. In fact, a good, brisk canter around the Common right now was exactly what she needed to clear her mind and spirits of the cobwebs gathering about them.

The story was that Bethany's grandfather Kingsley, her mother's father, had first set his granddaughter on a horse and walked the length of a farm lane with her when she was barely able to sit up alone. He had bought her a pony of her own when she was four and had instructed her himself in its management, encouraging her to race pellmell down hillsides, gallop across fields, and jump ditches and low stone fences until she was as at home in a saddle as in a drawing room.

There were those, including Rachel, who were faintly scandalized by such accomplishments in a female. A well-bred lady was expected to be equal to nothing more taxing than a walk when she rode, and the gentlest, most plodding of beasts was recommended for her choice of mount. Bethany's breeding, however, was beyond question in terms both of Bay Colony lineage and family fortune, and her grandfather had stated for any who cared to hear that he considered a degree of spirit and independence in a woman a greater asset to her than Helen of Troy's fabled beauty. He had provided further for Bethany's independence by willing her a sizable inheritance to be held in trust for her until she was twenty-one or until the day she was married. If Bethany so desired, she could live out her life in genteel spinsterhood like Rachel's Aunt Susan and never want for a thing.

A spinster on horseback, she thought. That might not be the worst of fates. But she shivered inside her spencer, the short, velvet jacket that was designed more for ornament than for protection against the sea-damp breeze that was rising.

Clouds were thickening in the sky as she left the Common. The day was quickly turning as dreary as it ought to be.

The carved front door opened for her as she mounted the steps to the house. A youth in the trim blue and gold livery Christiana had selected for the servants greeted her with a comradely smile of which Christiana would never have approved. That in itself was enough to win him a smile from Bethany in return.

"Thank you, Charles." She glanced at the mahogany chest that gleamed on one side of the reception hall and noted Christiana's white silk bonnet lying there and a pair of yellow mitts and a matching scarf tossed carelessly on the chair beside it. Christiana was not one to lighten the workload of her staff by sparing them the chore of picking up after her. "Am I the last one in?"

Charles shook a head which, despite diligent use of a hairbrush and many injunctions from Christiana, still had not quite lost its farmboy roughness. Perhaps that was why Bethany liked him better than the rest of Christiana's new household—that and the fact that he was not much older than she and was forgetful at times of the starched deportment Christiana required of her people.

"Mr. Herbert sent word he'll be a while longer at the warehouse," he said. "But Mrs. Herbert and Major Ainsley, they just got back from their drive."

That meant Christiana was probably in the dining room, overseeing the preparations for dinner, or else in her bedroom, already dressing for her guests. In either event, the chances were good that Bethany could gain her own room without encountering her stepmother, and that sort of circumstance was always counted on the plus side of Bethany's ledger.

She nodded and smiled up at Charles again. "Would you tell Nancy I'll be wanting her shortly? And have her bring along some hot water for washing." She pursed her lips at the wreck of her slipper as she set her foot on the bottom step of the polished staircase. "This wasn't the best of days for walking on the Common."

"Yes, miss. Right away," Charles said.

But he stood without moving, watching her mount the stairs until she sent a glance back at him from the first landing

that whisked him, reddening and stumbling, off down the hall toward the servants' wing.

Bethany was not altogether displeased. More and more often during the past year or so, male eyes had tended to follow her when she passed, and the look in all of them was oddly similar. She could not exactly put a name to that look, but she was beginning to realize that her lack of classic beauty might not be as blighting a misfortune as she had once feared it would be. Even the fiercely blue eyes of the man on the Common, after raking them both, had fixed themselves more directly on her than on Rachel, although that particular distinction had little in it to feed her vanity.

"Miss Herbert!" A voice hailed her from the foot of the stairs as she was crossing the second landing. "What luck. Have you just come in?"

She turned to see Major Ainsley hurrying up the stairs to join her. "Why, yes," she said, "I've been walking." And hated herself for never being able to think of anything intelligent to say to him.

"Yes, of course. You and your friend. A splendid day for it." Francis Ainsley smiled down at her. "If I were a painter, I believe I should have been strongly tempted to follow with my canvas and brushes and ask you to pose for me. You look like the spirit of spring, all pink and green as you are—rather like a rosebud."

"You are too kind." Bethany attempted a laugh that was a shade on the breathless side.

She wished she could know for sure whether his compliments were sincere or whether, as she sometimes suspected, he took a mischievous delight in saying things that would dissolve her efforts at poise.

Indeed, there was a quality of boyishness about his open face and cleanly molded chin. He was boyishly slender, too, all the more so in the yellow knit trousers he favored over the knee breeches most men still wore—a daring new fashion that hugged every inch of him from hip to boot top where a strap passed under his instep to keep the fabric taut.

Yet Bethany was keenly aware that he was not a boy, not in the sense that awkward and untried Charles was. Francis Ainsley was a man, and his presence crowded the wide landing.

"I'm not kind in the least," he said, "Actually, I am being quite selfish. Christiana tells me she has arranged for musicians and dancing tonight. What I am doing is trying to soften your heart so you will promise me the first waltz."

Bethany curled her fingers around the stair rail. She had not known Christiana was planning such elaborate entertainment for this party. Not that there was any surprise in that; Christiana was not in the habit of consulting Bethany on matters that occurred under the Herbert roof.

An assortment of excuses by which she might beg off spun through Bethany's mind. Dancing on the eve of the anniversary of her mother's death? Impossible! Gliding across the floor in the arms of Major Francis Ainsley . . .

To her amazement, she heard herself say, "I promise. If there is a waltz."

"There will be. Trust me for that." He laughed suddenly. "And trust Christiana, too. She fancies the waltz, and what my fair cousin fancies, as you may have discovered, she rarely does without."

He paused, enclosing Bethany in a smile more intimate and more tender than could possibly be warranted by anything either of them had said or done. Bethany withdrew a step, disconcerted, to where she felt the tread of the next stair nudge the back of her ankle.

A flicker of his eyelids and the strange intensity was quenched, the bantering lightness of his smile restored. Bethany could almost believe that for that brief moment he had been looking through her, not at her, and seeing someone or something else.

"Well, now, but I'm forgetting my errand. Christiana dispatched me to discover if you were in yet, and to bring you to her if you were. She knew it to be a task I would find highly agreeable."

The compliment this time passed Bethany unnoticed. "Christiana wants me? What for?"

Francis arched mystified blond eyebrows. "I confess I am as curious as you. So I propose we go at once and find out."

He escorted her up the rest of the stairs and on along the hall—not toward the Herberts' bedroom, however, but to Bethany's.

Christiana herself opened the door in response to his knock.

Neither he nor she appeared to mark the stiffening of Bethany's spine at this intrusion into her personal, private domain.

"Mission accomplished," Francis reported.

"Well done. Excellently well done," Christiana said, echoing the mock formality of his tone. "Bethany dear, come in." She beckoned Bethany forward as if Bethany were a guest and the invitation were a courtesy Christiana had the right to bestow. "But not you, Francis. This is exclusively a ladies' affair."

Francis inserted a shoulder and foot in the doorway as she was attempting to close the door. "Is there to be no reward for my faithful service?"

"All things in their season. You shall have your reward, never fear, but first you must practice patience." Christiana tilted her head so that an auburn curl danced against her cheek as she looked up at him. "Besides, faithfulness is its own reward, is it not?"

She closed the door on Francis's peal of laughter, leaving Bethany feeling stupidly young and shut out for being unable to fathom the meaning of the jest.

Bethany reasserted her position as proprietor of this room by laying her furled parasol across a chair seat, untying the scarf knotted under her chin, and removing her bonnet. "You wished to speak to me, Christiana?" she asked as she drew off her mitts and dropped them on the chair alongside bonnet, scarf, and parasol.

Christiana smiled her wide, sweet smile, ignoring the subtle disrespect that challenged her in both tone and gesture. "I want to give you something, Bethany dear. I had it made for you especially as a surprise for tonight."

She crossed the room and lifted a cloud of white from the bed. It was a gown of India muslin, a fabric so sheer that its own weight was hardly enough to keep it from rippling in the faint draft of Bethany's move to inspect it.

"I am certain it will fit. I had it cut after the measurements for your new riding habit."

Bethany backed away from Christiana's attempt to hold the gown up to her. "Thank you. It is a lovely gift. Beautiful. But—"

"But you already have trunks full of gowns?" Christiana filled in for her. Her chuckle was soft and confidential.

"There is no such thing as a woman's having too many pretty gowns. Besides, your father wants so much for us to mend our differences. Surely we each love him enough to try. Although, if you already have your heart set on one of your other gowns for this evening . . ."

She knew very well what choice Bethany had made from her wardrobe for this evening, Bethany thought. A casual question to Nancy, Bethany's maid, would have revealed that Bethany had directed that her purple silk, the darkest gown she had and the closest to real mourning, be freshened and pressed for this evening. She had intended it as a mute protest and, if her father's memory of happier years was not entirely dead, a jog to his conscience as well.

But now in Christiana's gift, its neckline, waistband, and hem trimmed in gold embroidery, its short sleeves attached with gold buttons set in petals of gold net, Bethany would gleam and flutter like the most carefree of butterflies. She could not refuse to wear it, not if her father was expecting to see her in it, no more than she could refuse to attend the dinner without provoking his coldest fury. Thus had Christiana manipulated everything.

Bethany met the older woman's eyes. There was not so much as a lowering of lashes on Christiana's part to conceal the truth of Bethany's surmise.

Christiana's smile remained unaltered. "Good. I believe we do understand each other."

She smoothed the gown onto the bed again and turned as a knock at the door announced Nancy, bearing a steaming kettle of water.

"I'll go now. I would like to stay and help you dress, but I must get started myself, and you are in good hands with Nancy. Do stop by, though, before the guests arrive, and show me the results of my creation. I know you are going to look beautiful."

Bethany ducked in an exaggerated curtsy as Christiana rustled out of the room. But exaggerated or not, it was a gesture of assent, and they both knew it.

There was nothing else Bethany could do but assent. There was no one to whom she could even vent her frustrations while she dressed. Nancy, plain, unsmiling, and thirtyish, would listen dutifully, to be sure, but she was not the sort of

maid who inspired confidences. Besides, she was part of Christiana's new staff and, for all Bethany knew, might be reporting Bethany's reactions and comments on whatever subject as a matter of course.

Her long toilette completed, Bethany stared into the mirror at the finished product. Her hair, brushed smooth into a low, Grecian knot in back and arranged in ringlets across her forehead, was the same bright gold as the gown's embroidered neckline. Together they formed a dramatic frame for the expanse of ivory shoulder and bosom left bare by the cut of the gown. Scarcely two inches of muslin separated the gold-flowered band of the high empire waistline and the identical flowers of the neckline where they crossed the cleft between her breasts.

Never had she worn anything so immodest, much less proposed to show herself in public so attired. She would be fortunate if her father did not order her from the drawing room the instant his eye fell on her. He seldom seemed to look at her with anything but displeasure these days, anyway, and he would see this gown as a proof of Christiana's frequent hints and sighs that his daughter's character displayed a dangerously wanton streak one would not expect in a girl of her Puritan upbringing.

It was true that Christiana herself dressed in the latest fashion without reproach from her husband. But Christiana was twenty-seven, mature, and a matron. Also, her figure was rounded on a more generous scale than Bethany's. When her creamy flesh swelled above the edge of her gown, there was still a great deal of breast that remained covered. Bethany's high, young breasts, in size more like oranges than melons, gave the impression that they would rise free of their confinement at her first deep breath.

She tried a deep breath by way of experiment—two, three—and was relieved to observe that the mirror disclosed no more of her person when her lungs were fully expanded than when they were empty. Aside from being so low cut, the gown was becoming, she had to admit. The soft muslin fell in Grecian folds from waistline to hem, accenting the grace of a figure she had always thought too slender for real beauty. She was all white and ivory and gold except for her eyes. Francis had laughingly declared on the day of his arrival that he found it

difficult to believe she was a loyal American because her eyes were the blue of the Union Jack. They were even bluer than that this evening.

What would Francis—Major Ainsley—say if he could see her now, garbed like this? A wicked wish that he might see her flitted through her mind, and the ivory tones of her mirrored image took on a rosy cast.

But no one was going to see her so, and neither would she offend Christiana by refusing her gift. Bethany pulled open a drawer and lifted out a filmy fichu of white lace. She would wear this spread over her shoulders, the ends crisscrossed to cover her bosom, brought around to the back of her waist, and tied in a firm knot like apron strings. The glory of the gown would be somewhat dimmed, but Christiana's maneuverings to widen the breach between Bethany and her father would be prettily foiled for once.

Only she would leave the fichu off until she had obediently shown herself for Christiana's approval. Best to save this countermove until it was too late for Christiana to do anything about it.

"Thank you, Nancy," Bethany said, almost blithe in anticipation of her stepmother's coming chagrin. "There is nothing else that needs doing, I think. You may go."

"Yes, Miss Herbert." Nancy gathered up the afternoon's mud-soiled garments and departed in the direction of the back stairs.

Bethany followed her into the hall, but turned the opposite way, heading for Christiana's little sitting room, which adjoined the master bedroom. Her feet in their white kid slippers were nearly soundless on the bare floor, and, she realized, much too quick and light for a girl supposedly smarting from a lesson in which woman in the house was the stronger. She paused a few steps from the sitting room door to pull her features into more suitably sullen lines.

A laugh within the room alerted her to the fact that the door was slightly ajar, then sent her pulse racing. Francis was there. He would see her unscreened by her fichu whether she willed it or not, and through no fault of hers.

But as she lifted her hand to knock, she was stopped by the sound of Christiana's voice. It was laughing, too, but the

quality Bethany always thought of as cool silk was warm and faintly roughened, even breathless:

"Francis, you idiot. You're mad. Suppose someone should walk in on us? My husband, for example. There is such a thing as being discreet."

"Discreet!" Francis complained. "I've been so damned discreet this past week, and charming and witty and agreeable and everything else you've said, and what has it got me? A few girlish blushes and giggles from the heiress, and nothing but cold bedsheets and a gnawing at my vitals from you." His tone grew more coaxing. "You didn't use to put such a value on discretion, Christie. Remember that stable loft that afternoon in Quebec? And your wedding night! Did Herbert ever question what became of you for that hour during the festivities?"

"Francis, Francis, Francis." Christiana's voice faded somewhat as if she were moving across the room, but the words were still distinct—far too distinct. "If you must throw discretion to the winds for the sake of ardor, do it where it will serve some purpose. You have been playing the gentleman to such a high degree that I honestly doubt the little goose realizes she is being courted. Woo her so she understands."

"I confess I have less of an appetite for green fruit than some men, but if there should be a firm promise of a particular reward in it—"

"There will be eighty thousand dollars, enough to pay off all your debts ten times over. You can sell your commission and settle down in Boston close by us—very close by." That new, warm laugh of Christiana's rippled again. "I know she is a pallid morsel according to your tastes, a thing I'm not sorry for in the least, but it won't take much to turn her silly head. And she won't put you off by looking like a Puritan schoolgirl this evening, I guarantee. Wait until you see—"

Bethany did not wait. She had stood frozen where she was first by lack of comprehension, then by incredulity. Now panic, born of shock and mortification, released her feet and she was hurtling down the hall, careless of whether her flight was heard or not.

In her own room, the door shut and the key turned in the lock, she halted on the rug in front of the fireplace. Her

impulse was to tear the gold and white gown in shreds and fling them into the fire. A goose, was she? A silly, pallid morsel whose attraction was reckoned in dollars? Yes, it was true, humiliatingly true. But no more. Not ever anymore.

Her hands were fumbling with the cords that laced the back of her bodice before the full import of what she had overheard began to sink in. Christiana and Francis—Christiana, her father's irreproachable wife.

Bethany abandoned the stubborn knot that held the lacing strings, her jumbled emotions crystallizing into one cold core of determination. It did not matter that the gaps in her actual knowledge meant she could only guess at some of the implications of what she had heard. She need offer no explanations; she need merely repeat the damning conversation word for word to her father as she had heard it.

Bethany swirled around to pace the length of her room from the windows to the fireplace. Tonight. She would tell him tonight as soon as she had a chance to speak to him alone. And as tangible evidence of Christiana's treachery, Bethany would wear the white and gold gown as Christiana had directed. The woman's fall from grace would be deliciously swift and irrevocable.

In front of the bureau, Bethany halted. With fingers that trembled from the precision of their movements, she folded the discarded white fichu and closed it away in a drawer.

Chapter II

Phillips Herbert stood at the far end of the drawing room, his back to the marble fireplace where he could keep an eye on the door to mark new arrivals while he conversed with those guests already at hand. His gaze fell on Bethany as soon as she entered. She felt the deepening chill of its disapproval the length of the room. A shade more firmness tightened the square of her shoulder and the lift of her chin. She hoped he was noticing, too, the sole piece of jewelry she had chosen to wear: a blue velvet ribbon around her neck from which hung a miniature of her mother set in a delicate gold frame.

Bethany could hear the pounding of her heart at her own audacity. It was still quite possible she would be sent back to her room in disgrace, but it would not happen right away. There was a tall, dark man talking to her father—a stranger she did not recognize—and there were several other guests chatting here and there in the room.

Her father was not a man to bring embarrassment on himself by creating a scene in public if he could avoid it. He would wait until he could politely disengage himself from his social duties for a moment and draw her aside to deliver his directives to her in relative privacy. Bethany had been counting on that when she delayed putting in an appearance until she was sure at least a handful of guests would be gathered ahead of her. Then, in that private moment, she would seize the opportunity to tell him about Francis and Christiana. She had spent the last hour rehearsing the exact words and manner in which she would do this.

What she had not counted on was that she would become the focus of every eye in the room, not just her father's, before she was well beyond the threshold. Mr. Lambreth, a part owner of one of the ships on which Mr. Herbert exported furs and other goods, faltered in the compliment he was paying Christiana, then paused altogether. Christiana's eyes

widened prettily, and she murmured an aside behind her fan to Mrs. Lambreth, whose head swiveled on her plump shoulders to stare at Bethany. The reaction of the other ladies and gentlemen paying their respects to Christiana or attending to the conversation of Mr. Herbert and the stranger was much the same. Even the stranger's interest swung to the doorway and was slow to swing away, although he appeared not to lose the thread of what he was saying.

The sensation Bethany created was like a riffle of breeze through leaves; it lasted a second or two and was gone. The hum of laughter and talk returned to its former level, and everything was as it had been.

Then Francis was bowing over her, raising her hand to his lips. "May I claim the privilege of being the first to do reverence to Venus? When I was promised a reward for waiting until Christiana's surprise was complete, I never dreamed it would be a vision such as this."

Less than three hours ago, the warmth of his tone and the sincerity of his smile would have halfway persuaded Bethany that he was in earnest and would have wholly reduced her to blushes and a stammering reply. Now, knowing him for what he was and what he intended, her little-girl foolishness fell away in an instant. She was suddenly in possession of a composure that caused her to withdraw her hand from his with the coolness and dignity of a queen.

"Take care, Major Ainsley, or you'll be turning my head. It may not take much, you know."

She saw the corner of his left eyebrow twitch quizzically, as if he were struck by the echo of words he had heard earlier; but if he recognized where or when, his smile grew only more openly admiring because of it.

"If I could depend upon its being turned my way, I should devote every waking minute to the undertaking. And I must warn you, I am a veteran of many campaigns."

"In that case, perhaps it is I who had best take care. I shall consider myself fairly warned," Bethany said. She was smiling, too, but struggling to keep the bitterness from her voice.

He did think she was as simple as that: a few blandishments, some exaggerated attentions, and she would tumble into his hands and her fortune into his pockets just like that.

She drew a step away from him to acknowledge the

Lambreths, who were advancing on her. "Such a lovely gown, my dear," Mrs. Lambreth said on a note that was studiously neither censure nor approval. "I can hardly credit how grown up you have become."

"A beautiful gown, a beautiful young lady," declared Mr. Lambreth. His behavior toward Bethany had always been in the manner of a patriarchal nod toward an unobtrusive child, but now he bent his portly self over her hand as Francis had. She noticed that the courtesy afforded him a chance to glance down at the cleft of her bosom and that it was a chance he did not pass up.

Mrs. Lambreth rested a hand on her husband's sleeve, detaining him at her side while she dimpled up at Francis to ask how long he had been in Boston. Bethany moved on to speak to another group of guests, as was proper for the daughter of the house. She was aware that Francis's eyes followed her although she did not look back.

There were other shoulders in the room as bare as hers. There was Mrs. Woodland, for example, who was wearing a silk scarf tossed over her shoulders but not so that it concealed anything in front that was left unconcealed by her gown; and Mrs. Jameson, who had tucked a ruffled lace modestly in her bosom where it somehow did more to call attention to the depth of her cleavage than to disguise it. Christiana was carrying a gauzy blue shawl over one arm, but the creamy ruching that edged the top of her gown dipped as low as Mrs. Woodland's. Even Mrs. Lambreth's more conservative gown was wide and low enough of neckline to provide a well-padded expanse of flesh tones as setting for the pearls at her throat.

Yet none of this prevented Mr. Woodland from bowing with a flourish that kept Bethany's fingers in his a fraction longer and more firmly than was necessary. Nor Mr. Jameson from stooping on the pretense of examining the miniature she wore when the real center of his interest was a few inches lower. Nor Captain Osgood, master of one of the ships that did her father's business in foreign ports, from closing a big hand around her bare arm as if he feared she might trip on the edge of the Oriental rug.

Pigs! Swine! All of you the same, she thought in a burst of anger she could not quite define. But she smiled sweetly at

the captain as she disengaged herself from his grasp, for there was a current of not unpleasant excitement racing beneath her disgust, a growing sense of herself as a woman that she had never felt before. She hoped that Francis was still watching, and that it was not beyond his powers of comprehension to realize men could find her attractive to a certain degree without having designs on her fortune.

"Bethany."

It was her father, beckoning her to join him at the far side of the fireplace. He was alone for the moment, and the furrow between his heavy brows said she had not misjudged his opinion of her costume. Bethany's courage wavered. Her father had been an indulgent parent most of her life, largely because he was too preoccupied with business affairs to be otherwise. She was not used to heated confrontations with him, and she had not relished the little practice she had gained in this area of late.

But that was why she was here this evening. The coming confrontation, once endured, would set her world to rights again as it had been in the days before Christiana.

She spread her fan and closed it, curving her hand tightly around the folded ivory strips, and walked resolutely toward him, the thin muslin a sheath that was almost dazzling where it caught the fireglow.

"Yes, Father?"

He minced no words. "What do you think you are doing, dressed like that?"

"This gown?" Bethany smoothed the skirt and raised her gaze to meet his. "Christiana had it made for me. It's a gift. She asked me to wear it this evening."

"Christiana?" His mouth thinned as he bit into this unexpected peppercorn. He would not willingly criticize Christiana, but neither would he swallow his disapproval in silence.

Bethany nodded, her own mouth a trifle dry. Should she plunge ahead now and ask to speak to him alone in the library or somewhere? Or should she first prepare the ground a little more? The ground she meant soon to cut from under Christiana?

"The gown is in honor of Major Ainsley, I suppose. I wore it so as not to offend her. But I had another one, my purple silk, laid out for this evening before that." Her hand went to

the miniature at her throat. "I thought it would be more appropriate."

"It certainly would have been more appropriate," Phillips Herbert said, although Bethany knew he would not recognize any of her gowns save this one no matter how often he had seen them. His frown encompassed her from shoulders to hem without a sign that he understood the miniature's purpose beyond that of decoration. "This dress is not in the least appropriate. Most particularly not to a young girl."

"But she is not a young girl. She is a young woman." Christiana, her voice as light as her step, glided in between them. She gave her husband a playful tap with her fan. "What can we do to convince you, my dear, that your baby girl is no more? She's very quickly growing up."

This was the last quarter from which Bethany would have looked for a champion. She was on guard at once, baffled by what might lie behind the gesture and the more mistrustful of it because of that.

There was bafflement in her father's frown, too, but a thinning of the anger beneath it as if he expected an explanation that would be fully satisfactory. "You selected this costume for her, my dear?"

"I did. And it is every bit as charming as I thought it would be. Except perhaps just a trifle . . ." Christiana shrugged prettily and turned a smile of tolerant regret on Bethany. "I do wish you had come to show yourself to me when you were dressed. I thought we'd agreed on that. I have a little printed shawl I am sure would have been perfect for you to wear over your shoulders."

Thus Christiana, ever generous, ever guileless, ever good, had been thwarted again in her efforts to guide Bethany, and Bethany again was in the wrong. Bethany had been unable to resist the temptation to make a display of herself. One glance at her father told Bethany that he understood these things quite as he was intended to, and that he believed them as well.

She and Christiana were nearly of a height. Fury and the power of her secret knowledge drew her an inch taller.

"I did come to your room to show you," she said in as level a tone as she could muster. "But it happened I chose a

time when you were already very much occupied with other affairs, and I thought it best not to interrupt."

"That is no real excuse for not keeping your word," her father said. "If it was not courteous to interrupt Christiana at a given time, there was nothing to prevent you from returning in ten or fifteen minutes when—"

But he himself was interrupted by a gentle tug at his coat sleeve. "We cannot discuss it now," Christiana murmured. "Our guests will be wondering. And here are the Preston-Cooks, I believe." She nodded toward the door where a newly arrived couple stood.

"Yes. Yes, of course." The severity in Phillips Herbert's features relaxed into lines more becoming to a cordial host, but the granite edge was still visible as he bent his head for a parting word to Bethany. "Later, then, my girl. We will discuss this later, for we have not had done with this matter yet."

We have not indeed, Bethany thought, looking after him as he crossed the room to greet the new guests. A glow of triumph kindled in her at the realization that the interview she had wanted and the revelations she would unfold in it were now inevitable.

She was startled to find Christiana lingering beside her, her air of benevolence and faint amusement unchanged.

"I think we must try for a better understanding, you and I," she said. "I am sure we would discover our little differences are not so great after all. I should hate to have anyone near me be hurt by a hasty judgment or some foolish act done out of thoughtlessness. As for the shawl I mentioned, you can always send Nancy to fetch it if you feel chilly."

Bethany did feel a chill, but it did not stem from a draft leaking in around the windowpanes or from the temperature of the room; it was the subtle emphasis Christiana had laid on those words: "I should hate to have anyone near me be hurt . . ." Lest the message be missed or disregarded, her fingers circled Bethany's wrist, pressing hard fingernails deep into the soft flesh as she drew her around to face the room.

"Now then . . ." Christiana's auburn curls slipped gracefully against her cheek as, head slightly tilted, she let her smile travel among the array of gauzy gowns and ruffled

shirts. "There is Mr. Stark all alone. And I don't believe he has been presented to you yet."

Bethany had only time to gather that Mr. Stark was the dark, tall stranger she had seen with her father and that he was standing apart from the other guests, seemingly more interested in the view from the windows than in the scene inside. The next thing she knew, her hand was in his and he was bowing to her while Christiana performed a gracious introduction. He was Joshua Stark, a native of Virginia who was in Boston for business reasons, and to judge by the stiffness of his bow, the indifference with which he relinquished Bethany's hand, and his failure to brighten as most men did under Christiana's attentions, he was utterly bored by his surroundings.

"Mr. Stark is very familiar with the West and the fur trading country," Christiana said, undaunted. "I am sure he can tell you a great many interesting things, Bethany, about the place where your friends will be stationed. A fort somewhere, isn't it? Near Detroit?"

"Fort Dearborn. At Chicago," Bethany said. It was a thing Christiana knew perfectly well, for hadn't she argued ardently against Bethany's accepting Rachel's invitation to go along?

And why had Christiana argued against it? The reason, until now a mystery, sprang into Bethany's mind like the turning of a page. It was imperative that Bethany stay in Boston where the dashing Major Ainsley could recoup his fortunes by wooing and winning her silly young heart.

If anything was needed to steady Bethany's resolve, this newest insult would do it. She lowered her lashes to veil her fury from Christiana, but Christiana had already drifted on to another group, leaving Bethany safely moored in the company of Mr. Joshua Stark.

And Mr. Joshua Stark was saying politely, "I would be honored to answer any question that I can about the West. I have, in fact, visited Chicago on a number of occasions."

Something different in his speech, the strong timbre of his voice perhaps, or an accent that was nearly British but less clipped, was not altogether unfamiliar to her ears. She looked up, curious, and was met by those same blue eyes that had blazed down at her from horseback on the Common a few hours earlier. "You!"

"And you. I wasn't sure but what you would prefer not to acknowledge our former and somewhat less formal acquaintance."

It was no longer anger that made his eyes so vivid in his dark face, but Bethany did not like the glimmer of sardonic humor in them much better.

"I fear you have a false notion of the capacities of graven images, Mr. Stark," she said, and was pleased to discover that her icy new poise had not deserted her. "I confess, however, that it was thoughtless of me to remind you of an incident you must surely find uncomfortable. Please forgive me."

An inclination of his head accepted her apology as if, in fact, it were not he who owed the apology for having caused the incident in the first place. The irony behind her words appeared to escape him entirely.

"You are perhaps distracted by thoughts of the friend who is departing for Chicago," he suggested.

"Perhaps. In part." She hoped that her tone conveyed that the matter was none of his business. In one more try at putting him in his place, she added, "I know very little of life in the West, but I presume people on the frontier do not have much opportunity to know horses, for example, nor how to handle them."

"On the contrary, your friend will find it a considerable advantage, not to say a necessity, to be able to handle a horse skillfully. There are few roads in the Northwest Territory, and none in the farthest western reaches such as Chicago that will accommodate a coach or carriage. A person who has a distance to travel overland either rides or follows the trail on foot—and takes in stride hardships I am sure a young lady such as yourself would not even care to hear about."

His courtesy was so impersonal it was almost an affront. She might be as acid or as cold as she chose; he would remain unruffled because her opinion—and probably that of everyone else in the room—had too low a value in his estimation to merit a serious thought.

And what grace had lifted him to such superiority? He was perhaps the tallest man in the room, but by no more than an inch at most. He was well built but somewhat on the lean side

and lacking the swell of muscles under his coat that was threatening to burst Captain Osgood's at the seams.

Some might call him good-looking. His hair was dark and thick, his hands and feet well shaped and neither too small nor too large. But he was by no means the most handsome man Bethany had ever seen. His features were too strong: his forehead too broad for the tapering jut of his chin, his mouth thin but too wide for the uncompromising straightness of a nose that was hewn rather than sculpted to form. And those eyes, of course, arresting because so unexpected in a setting of black brows and lashes and a complexion dark by nature and weathered darker yet.

He needed only an eye patch and a hat bearing a skull and crossbones to perfectly suit Bethany's mental picture of a pirate. That is, if a pirate could be expected to be as little excited by an array of beautifully dressed people in a well-appointed drawing room as Mr. Joshua Stark's remote expression suggested him to be.

She opened her fan with a small flip of vexation. If he imagined his presence here enhanced the evening any more for her than hers did for him, he was badly mistaken. Besides, he was answering her questions as if she were a child, and a simpleminded child at that. She had never felt less like a child.

"Then you must have endured all those hardships yourself not too long ago," she said, uttering whatever came into her head while she stole a sidelong glance over her shoulder in search of a graceful means of escape. "How impressive! Just to be with us this evening."

"Highly impressive," he agreed, "but unfortunately, not quite the case. My most recent traveling has been limited to the distance between my inn and your father's warehouse, and, this evening, his home. Which is not to say, of course, there are not hazards in such travel, most particularly in attempting to cross Boston Common."

A touch of her elbow spared Bethany from having to form an immediate retort to this barb. She turned gladly and wished at once that she had not.

Major Ainsley was beside her, bending over her as if she already belonged to him. "You are making yourself the envy of every man here, Mr. Stark, by monopolizing the prettiest

lady in the room," he said, almost as if he really meant it. "I thought it only fair to warn you, sir."

But Bethany in turning had caught a glimpse of Christiana watching from beyond Mr. Preston-Cook's elegant jade-green back. Clearly it was she who had dispatched Francis to keep a closer eye on their quarry. Christiana could not be certain what, if anything, Bethany had overheard outside her door, but she was not one to take chances. Could it be that Christiana was also a trifle worried?

Bethany was surprised by the merriment of her own laugh. A spirit of recklessness seized her.

"It is Mr. Stark who is being monopolized, I fear." She slanted a smile up at the unresponsive pirate face as if he were the most desirable man on earth. Let the Ainsley cousins stew a while trying to figure that out. "He knows all about Fort Dearborn and the western wilderness, and of course I am fascinated."

"Fort Dearborn? Of course," Francis said, although she doubted he saw any "of course" about it where she was concerned. "But I'm not totally ignorant on that subject myself. A fairly new post, isn't it? Established no more than two or three years ago—1809, 1810?"

"Something like that," Joshua Stark said. "It is one of several forts our government has recently felt obliged to establish along the frontier to protect our people from misguided Indians."

Francis had a short, high laugh that was rather like the yip of a small dog. "*Misguided!* That's a singular term to apply to our red brethren. Would it were in anyone's power to guide them, mis- or otherwise."

"When an Indian suddenly takes it into his head to unite every tribe from Lake Superior to the swamps of Florida in a single alliance—a concept that has no parallel, no precedent in either the history or the philosophy of any tribe; when he actually succeeds in uniting some and leads them into battle against the United States Army; when these tribes are armed with ammunition and guns they had received as gifts from the British in Canada and their leader's most prized adornment is a scarlet coat bestowed on him by the Crown . . ." Joshua Stark shrugged and made a downward, outward gesture of dismissal with the flat of his hand. "Well, there are some of

us foolish enough to suspect the man may not be leading so much as being led."

"That fellow Tecumseh, you mean?" Francis sounded incredulous. "I understood your General Harrison routed him and his forces quite thoroughly last fall at—what was that place?"

"Tippecanoe," Bethany supplied. The jingle of the name had stuck in her memory without many of the other details, but she might as well have kept silent for any notice either man took of her contribution.

"And I understand he is in Canada now, building up his forces in the expectation of receiving considerably more than moral support to help launch a second try."

The two men looked hard at each other, the Englishman smiling faintly, the American smiling not at all.

"I don't deny that we are in competition, your side of the border and mine, business competition for the best pelts the region can produce. If a scarlet coat or a silver medallion or whatnot, or a supply of powder and lead to help a man provide for his family through the winter will encourage him to bring his furs to Montreal for trade next spring, we would be fools not to make the investment." Francis barked his short laugh again. "And you, my dear sir, would be foremost in calling us such, I am sure. Frankly, we would keep the savages the year round in Canada under our jurisdiction if we could, but as I said before, there is no controlling an Indian's fancy for wandering and for doing as he pleases. The same is true of the use to which he chooses to put his gifts once he's got them—where he wears them or what he shoots at. You might better hold the Crown accountable for the weather."

Bethany wondered at the condescension Francis managed to inject into every syllable. Joshua Stark was the last man she expected to let himself be patronized, especially by a man no more than a year or two his senior, and Francis, she felt—when had she formed this estimate of him?—was not a man to provoke an open quarrel if he could avoid it.

But Mr. Stark merely bowed and said in an even voice, "I am grateful to be set right on that subject since a part of my reason for being in Boston is to deliver to Mr. Herbert the personal effects of his uncle, who received a ball through the temple last winter from one of those gift muskets. The Indian

who did it lost a medal in the scuffle before the gun went off—one that was given him by the British soldiers at the fort across the river from Detroit."

"Mr. Herbert's uncle? I'm sorry to hear that. Very sorry. The Indian was a renegade, of course. Or crazy. Had to be," Francis said, but a flush was mottling his fair skin. He bent toward Bethany again, bringing his shoulder partway between her and the tight-lipped Mr. Stark. "But I think we are wearying you, Miss Herbert. If you will permit me . . ."

Bethany sidestepped the hand he would have put on her elbow to turn her away. Her interest in Joshua Stark was no longer pretended. "Were you a friend of my father's uncle?"

She herself had met Samuel Herbert no more than twice that she could remember, but her recollections of him were vivid: a bearded, hearty man who spun fascinating tales of the frontier life he preferred as his share of the fur trading and exporting business in which he and her father, more a brother than a nephew in age, were partners. Word of his death had reached Boston a number of weeks ago but not the details of how or why it had happened. She would have liked to have known him better.

"I believe you could say he and I were friends." Mr. Stark's studied courtesy became a fraction less perfunctory. "He was a good man, a good friend."

And was Phillips Herbert aware that his precious bride's cousin might be responsible, however remotely, for Samuel Herbert's death? It was Phillips's contention that New England would have violated the course of Nature far less by sticking with Old England than she had by throwing in her lot with a pack of Republicans like Mr. Jefferson, who had brought the maritime states to the brink of ruin by prohibiting American ships from trading in foreign ports in a fruitless attempt to wring concessions from Britain and France. Like many another merchant who saw his goods molding in a warehouse and his ships riding uselessly at dockside, Phillips Herbert had sought out new acquaintances and willing hands to move his cargoes quietly over the Canadian border and on to their original destinations.

Jefferson's administration and his Embargo Act had come to an end three years ago, in 1809, but the mistrust of the

government that it had ignited and the revived respect for Britain and things British were still very much alive.

Bethany paid small heed to politics. It was less tedious simply to accept what her father said was right or wrong and to think no further about it, but tonight her father's views on many things might well be altered.

"I'm sure Mr. Herbert's uncle was an extremely fine person. No one related to Mr. Herbert could help but be," Francis said, and contrived by a tilt of his head to twist the remark into a compliment for Bethany. Once again his hand approached her elbow as if to draw her away.

Bethany felt herself flushing, but it was not with pleasure. How dared he proclaim publicly that he supposed her so great a simpleton as to be swayed by empty extravagances like that? She would be sick on the spot if her flesh had to endure that possessive brush of his fingers one more time. "You must meet Mr. Preston-Cook, Mr. Stark," she said hastily but in a superb imitation of Christiana's smooth-as-cream style of managing a situation. "He and my Uncle Herbert grew up together."

She halfway expected Joshua Stark to decline the suggestion, but he followed her without protest, leaving Francis Ainsley to trail along behind or to seek other company as he pleased. The major's pleasure was to respond to a greeting from another quarter and saunter off in that direction. Perhaps he was beginning to understand that the power of his charm was not irresistible.

She did not look at him again nor at Christiana, but filled the remaining quarter hour till dinner by smiling at Mr. Stark, hanging on the Uncle Herbert recollections of Mr. Preston-Cook, spreading her fan to cover demure giggles in response to sallies from Mr. Jameson, and finally, accepting Captain Osgood's request to escort her downstairs to the dining room.

She remembered little of the dinner itself save that her wineglass seemed to be empty more often than full and that helpings of baked shad, roast beef, chicken with oyster stuffing, pheasant in orange sauce, and other delicacies seemed to appear on her plate and be whisked away without her ever tasting more than a mouthful. She laughed a great deal and kept up a bright chatter about she did not know what to her dinner partner, a jowled gentleman who beamed at every

flutter of her lashes, and to Joshua Stark on her left, whose polite smile had a quizzical crook to it whenever he attended to her prattling. A sheen of white damask, silver serving dishes, English-made china and crystal separated her from her father and Christiana and Francis, and she was careful not to see any glances they exchanged among themselves or cast at her.

The candles had been lighted and the velvet drapes drawn against the lowering dusk when the ladies returned to the drawing room to wait for the men to complete their dinner with brandy and cigars.

"I do hope they don't get started talking politics," Mrs. Jameson murmured beside Bethany. "At least not about war."

"War?" Bethany repeated, not quite comprehending and not much caring to try. Her mind was busy framing how best to plead a sick headache to Christiana and thereby win an excuse to withdraw from the gathering for the rest of the evening—withdraw to a place where she was sure to encounter her father alone before the evening was done. "Has there been more news about Napoleon?"

"No, no, not the war in Europe, although goodness knows they can get heated enough when they start on that. What I fear is that they will begin on the sort of thing that Mr. Stark was telling you before dinner. Forgive me, dear, but I couldn't help overhearing a part of the conversation; his views are so like those of Mr. Jameson and Captain Osgood, too, about our relationship with the British, and I was so afraid they might chime in right there and offend Major Ainsley. He is such a pleasant, attractive gentleman."

Bethany avoided having to agree to this by saying, "I am sure Mr. Stark had no intention of provoking a quarrel."

She was in fact sure of no such thing. Rather, now that she paused to think of it, she was inclined to believe that Joshua Stark would not have been sorry to have done exactly that. Even during dinner she had felt that he wore the conventions of polite society exactly as he did his plum-colored coat, to suit an occasion, and that he could shrug free of either or both with equal ease. His behavior on the Common was proof that he was not fully civilized.

"Of course, I'm sure, too, that he meant no mischief. But with Major Ainsley and your lovely stepmother being English

and the gentlemen here all holding strong opinions on politics one way and another . . .” Mrs. Jameson shook her head and sank onto a love seat, arranging herself to make room for Bethany. “Well, I must tell you, dear, I think you handled that bit of awkwardness beautifully. Things seem to happen so quickly these days. You’ve grown into a young woman just since I last saw you.”

Bethany understood that she had been forgiven the daring of her gown because of the rightness of her actions. The praise was misplaced—had the two men gone for each other’s throats and left her alone, she would have been tempted to applaud—and the offered seat was unwanted, but she accepted both, bobbing a demure, “Thank you.”

Mrs. Jameson proceeded to atone for her earlier coolness by telling of her niece in Cambridge, who was also growing up quickly and as clever a girl as ever embroidered a satin pillow cover. Before the account was finished, the men had rejoined them; the musicians were tuning up in the room prepared for the dancing, and Bethany was claimed for the first reel by Captain Osgood.

After the captain, there were Mr. Preston-Cook and her portly dinner partner and Mr. Jameson and, surprisingly, Joshua Stark. More surprising, he was light on his feet and as responsive to the music as she was. Bethany loved dancing under ordinary circumstances, and she was almost beginning to enjoy herself. Then the musicians changed their tempo, and Francis was at her side, taking possession of her hand as if he owned it.

“You promised me the first waltz.”

She thought of pressing her fingertips to her temple and pleading that headache now, but it was too late for it to be convincing. “I fear I shall be an unsatisfactory partner. I’m not very familiar with the step. So many people think it isn’t quite proper.”

“It is said to be the Prince Regent’s favorite dance. What better recommendation is there than that?” Francis slipped a firm arm around her and drew her to the center of the floor. “If you haven’t learned it yet, it is high time you do.”

Bethany had no alternative but to submit, but she moved stiffly in his arms, performing the walk and glide steps as he directed and keeping as great a distance between him and

herself as she could manage. It was not true that she was a stranger to waltzing. She and Rachel and the girls in their circle of friends had practiced it often among themselves with the zest that is part of doing something halfway forbidden, and at one or two parties supervised by parents of a more modern frame of mind, they had tasted the delight of dancing it with boys. Those dances were not the same as this tonight, however, and she was not the same person.

Her eyes felt as fixed as stones. She stared past Francis's shoulder at the trio of musicians at the back of the room, at the glister of jewels in Christiana's hair as she was trundled past in Captain Osgood's sturdy arms, and at the brooding face of Joshua Stark, watching from the sidelines. A moment later she was staring at a plum-colored sleeve as a hand tapped Francis's shoulder and a deep voice asked, "May I?"

Bethany scarcely waited for Francis to yield her but slipped into the rescuing arms as if she had been expecting them. Her relief at escaping Francis was so great she forgot her stiffness and let herself relax into harmony with the smooth motion of her new partner.

But he was holding her too close, much too close. His thigh pressed full against hers as he guided her in a turn. She leaned back and away from him, shortening her steps to gain some space. Any gentleman would accede to such a hint at once. Instead, the arm enclosing her waist tightened, drawing her even closer.

"Mr. Stark, please—" She had to tilt her head aside to save her cheekbone from being grazed by his chin.

"My pleasure," he murmured, as if rather than accepting a correction, he were granting a favor, but the distance between them became more discreet.

He had danced her to the end of the room near the door. As the final chords of the waltz swelled to a finish, he swung her on through the door and out into the hall. There, just beyond the sight of those inside, he pulled her against him with both arms and set his mouth on hers in a long, hard kiss.

Bethany was too astonished at first to resist. When she did begin to struggle, he released her slowly, making it his decision, not hers.

"You!" She was fighting to catch her breath. "You—"

"Just part of the game," he said. His voice was suddenly

harsh. "What the handsome major's interest by making him jealous: that is what we've been playing, isn't it? What you've been up to all this evening?"

Bethany gasped. "You are as vile as he is."

She had not struck anyone since she was six, but now the upward sweep of her hand was pure reflex, and the tingle of her fingers against his jaw pure gratification. In the same motion, she whirled and fled down the hall away from him and the party and all the forces that seemed to be gathering against her.

Laughter in the kitchen brought her to a standstill at the foot of the back stairs. She did not want to encounter anyone, not even servants going about their proper business. She wanted to be by herself, unmolested, for a while, and she definitely wanted no further part of Christiana's entertaining.

Therefore her bedroom would not do as a refuge. It would be the first place her stepmother would look for her, and Christiana or Christiana's servants would surely come looking for her as soon as her absence from the gathering was noticed. Christiana was not one to be easily thwarted.

Bethany retraced her steps as far as the library. No one should have cause to pry in here until after all the guests were gone. Then, eventually, her father would come for his customary half hour of reading before he went to bed. What better place to wait out the hour or so of Christiana's supremacy?

She glanced up and down the empty hallway and glided inside, closing the door quietly behind her. A fire was already burning on the hearth. Her father's Windsor chair sat in its glow, a tranquil invitation to be comfortable. Her knees were shaking, she realized as she sat down, and her heart was still beating like a trapped bird's. He had no right to do that to her. No man in the world had any such right.

Kisses had been stolen from her before. It wasn't that. She had also paid her share of kisses as forfeits in games she and her friends had played. But never had she felt beyond her depth as she had for those few seconds tonight. And never had she been subjected to a kiss that was a calculated affront.

She sprang up to start a restless circuit of the room. Let him think what he pleased of her. He could not scorn her

more than she did him. After tonight the truth would be out. When her father heard the things she had to tell, he would—

Would what? She paused by the paper-strewn table to wrestle a doubt that had not occurred to her before. A scandal like this in a respectable household—it was unthinkable that her father would let it be published abroad if there were any possible way of hushing it up. But how would he do it? Refuse to credit Bethany's story? Excuse and forgive Christiana? No, either of those had to be impossible.

She stared at the shadowed bookshelves beyond the fire-light's reach, seeing again in her mind's eye the delightful picture that had been sustaining her all this while: that of Christiana, dishonored and disgraced, being turned out alone into the street and the heavy front door being slammed and barred against her. The image wavered, and with it Bethany's confidence.

A heavy crystal decanter stood on the table. She poured a finger of brandy into the glass beside it to settle her nerves and steady her courage. The guests would be helping themselves to punch soon, a mixture of rum and brandy and champagne flavored with lemon and sugar, and to an assortment of cakes and pastries. A short while after that, the carriages would be arriving, and Christiana's party would be over. Truly and finally over in a very short while.

Bethany returned to the chair in front of the fire to sip the brandy, but the drink neither lifted her spirits as the dinner wine had done nor soothed the erratic jumping of her heart. Neither did it help to page through her onetime favorite, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which she pulled from a shelf when she carried her glass back to the decanter for a second, more generous portion. Several minutes later it occurred to her that her father might be more favorably impressed if he found her reading something less frivolous. She exchanged the *Mysteries* for *The Pilgrim's Progress* and returned to her chair.

The glass was empty a second time with as disappointing results as the first, and she was wondering what hour it was, when she heard footsteps outside the door and the rattle of the knob as it was turned. She rose so quickly that the book thudded to the floor and the glass careened after it to shatter on the hearth.

Her mind was so full of what she would say to her father and

how she would say it that her brain registered only slowly that the man in the doorway was not Phillips Herbert.

Major Ainsley, however, showed no surprise whatever. "Here you are! When one of the servants said she thought she had seen you come in here, I knew that fellow Stark's story that you were taken suddenly ill wasn't true." He shut the door and advanced on her, his hand extended. "So help me, if that man gave you the least cause—"

Bethany's stare halted him. "Mr. Stark was not lying. I have not been feeling well all evening." Nor was she lying, let Francis Ainsley construe it as he liked. She drew a deep breath and closed her hand around one of the spokes of the chair back to steady herself. "Furthermore, Major Ainsley, I have no wish for your championship no matter what may be the cause."

"I've angered you somehow, haven't I? But I swear I don't know how." The pain on his face could almost have been real. "Surely you must have gathered by now that I would rather cut off my right arm than offend you."

Bethany's lips tightened in an unbelieving smile. "Eighty thousand dollars, that's the price you'd take for your right arm, then?"

"Ah!" His nod was more gratified than perturbed. "Christiana guessed it must be something like that. Didn't anyone ever warn you that little girls who eavesdrop seldom hear any good?"

"I didn't eavesdrop. I overheard. Because Christiana told me to come to her room when I was dressed, and I did."

"Yes, I don't doubt it. It wouldn't be the first time my cousin outsmarted herself in her passion for ordering about other people's lives to suit her fancy." He moved past her to the hearth, and lifting a candle from a sconce on the wall beside the fireplace, knelt to light it from the flames. "Do you mind? I detest a room full of shadows and half-light. I like to see what I'm discussing."

Bethany retreated to the farther side of the table. "I don't have anything to discuss—except with my father."

"Don't you?" He touched his candle flame to the wicks of the other candles in the sconces flanking the mantel, to a slender taper on the candlestand in the corner, and finally to the pair of candles in squat silver holders on the table. The

shadows fled to the depth of the bookshelves and to the corners of the lofty ceiling.

"It strikes me you and I are in the same boat," he said, turning to her again after he had restored the first candle to its place. "Both of us being manipulated into something Christiana wants. I assure you I hate being managed like that every particle as much as you do, but before we jump ship, I think we owe it to ourselves to consider if we might not have been well pleased with the situation had it come about by itself. There's no sense throwing a good thing away simply because it wasn't our own idea at the start."

"A good thing, yes." Bethany was beginning to feel the brandy at last, warming her blood and loosening her tongue. "I heard how good a thing it would be for you and her. If she's so clever at managing things, why didn't she manage a rich old husband for herself, one that would die shortly and leave her free to buy you for herself?"

Mockery slitted the gray eyes watching her and pulled the edge of his mouth up in a half smile. "Are you so certain she never tried? Not that we don't all rejoice in your father's regained health since his marriage, but he was a very ill man for a time there in Quebec."

Despite the brandy's heat, Bethany went cold to the soles of her feet. It was true: her father had been longer in Quebec last year than he'd intended because he had been taken ill with a fever that left him gaunt and easily tired well into the fall. How Christiana must have been hoping.

Francis laughed. "Don't look like that. I didn't say it was fact. Besides, your father is as hearty and hale as any of us and likely to go on so for a great many years to come. What's more, I wouldn't marry Christiana under any circumstances, not even if she were Queen of Sheba and in possession of the wealth of the Indies. I'm fond of her, yes, but not to the point of jumping through the sort of hoop she can manufacture from a wedding ring."

"How flattering that you should have fixed on me, a man with such exacting standards," she said. She was aware dimly of a far-off ache where her hands had clamped themselves on the table edge.

"Flattering, inevitable, wholly agreeable, if you would be honest with yourself." He was standing at the table now,

leaning toward her across it, his gaze somehow intensifying the heat from the candle flames. "You've found me attractive enough up to a few hours ago, haven't you? Admit it. Even now, angry as you think you are, you aren't indifferent to me. I can tell."

"I am. You can't."

Why did this have to be the moment the brandy reached her head and set it swimming? The soft insinuation in his voice, the dancing candle flames, the odd light shining in his eyes—it was as if he were hypnotizing her. A part of her brain hated and despised him more than ever, but another part held her motionless until he had rounded the table and was reaching for her, and then it was too late.

For the second time this evening a man was kissing her against her will. He was smoothing her against him, his hand pressing down the length of her spine to cup the diminutive swell below it.

She twisted her head aside, trying to elude him, her teeth clenched in resistance. One of his hands moved upward from her shoulder to tangle itself in her hair and wrench. He was forcing her off balance, forcing her to clutch at him to keep from falling, forcing her to yield. She stumbled backward, stumbled again, and stumbled once more.

Her foot struck something—that treacherous volume of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Her ankle turned, and she was falling. She was clinging to him for support and he was letting her fall. He was dropping with her.

Through the whirling in her head she realized she was half sitting, half lying against his thigh as he knelt on one knee, holding her. She heard his quick breathing, felt his hand caressing her neck and her bare shoulder, heard the fragile fabric of her gown tear, felt his lips moving down her throat.

The full tide of outrage rolled over her again. "Stop! Shame!"

She scrambled to get her feet under her, pushing at his elbows, knees, and hands.

If there was a warning click when the door was flung open, she did not hear it. What she did hear was the shock in her father's gasp: "Bethany!"

Before she could grasp what had happened, the arms that had been imprisoning her were lifting her to her feet, and

Francis was saying too loudly: "Miss Herbert—ah—tripped. On the hearth rug, I believe. She took a nasty tumble, I fear."

Bethany, flushed, breathless, her hair spilling in disarray over her shoulders, stared in horror at the doorway where a cluster of faces stared stonily back at her. Her father must have planned to do some business with them in the library or to show them a new book he had acquired. He did that sometimes.

"Poor Bethany!"

It was Christiana's trill—high, light, and falsely sympathetic. She slipped past her husband and sped across the room, shrugging free of the silk shawl she wore and draping it at once around Bethany's shoulders, crossing the ends deftly over the pink nipple the torn gown no longer concealed. "We'd best get you off where we can make sure you haven't suffered any serious hurt."

There was a jumble of other voices after that—Phillips Herbert's, Francis's, Mr. Lambreth's. But Bethany retained only two clear memories of that dreadful walk to the door and through it into the shadows of the hall: the merciless brilliance of the candles ablaze in the room and the undisguised contempt on the face of Joshua Stark.

Chapter III

"Hush, Nell. Easy, girl," Bethany soothed in an undertone as her fingers fumbled at the rope she was trying to knot.

The bay mare tossed her head and blew impatiently. She was not accustomed to being roused and saddled in the first thinning of darkness before dawn.

"Hush, Nellie, hush, hush," Bethany implored.

She reached up a hand to pat the animal's sleek neck, her other hand steadying the bulging sack she was attempting to tie to the back of the saddle. Luck had been with her so far this morning. Not a soul had been about when she crept out of her room, through the upper hall, and down the back stairs. If she could just finish here in the stable and gain the road undetected, chances were good that she would not be missed for hours, maybe not all morning. Her father never looked in on her before leaving for his warehouse office and never expected her to share in his 5:00 A.M. breakfast. Christiana, having savored her moment of triumph to the full yesterday, would be occupied by other duties and pleasures today, and Bethany's door, firmly shut, would discourage any of the servants from happening into the empty room too soon.

Nellie stamped a restive foot, shifting her weight from one side to the other. The sack slid askew. Bethany dropped to catch it as it tumbled toward the floor. The water pail overturned, striking the side of the stall with a bang like the blast of a cannon.

She held her breath, listening. Floorboards creaked overhead. A door opened above and a voice called, "Who's down there? Someone there?"

Bethany did not answer. There was no way she could explain her presence here at this hour to Isaac Collins, the groom, that would not send him straight to her father with a tale that his daughter was "actin' mighty peculiar," even if he did not gather outright that she was "fixin' to run off."

Isaac's opinion of womenfolk and their foibles was low enough at the best of times; he would gladly see them all locked away for safekeeping if he had the opportunity.

Footsteps were descending the stairs. Bethany shrank into a corner on the strength of a vague hope that she might not be seen in the dimness and Isaac would think he had been wakened merely by the normal shifting of the horses in their stalls. But there, hanging from a nail of course, was the lantern she had lacked the wit to douse, and there in its beam stood Nellie, bridled and saddled.

And there now, too, staring in at her, his hair tousled, his nightshirt bundled into his breeches, was not Isaac but Charles, the young footman.

"Who's that?" he challenged, lifting his own lantern high. "What do you think you're—" The harshness in his voice altered to a startled apology as Bethany stepped forward.

"Sh-h-h," she warned, a finger to her lips. "I'm sorry I roused you. I thought I could manage without disturbing anyone. Is Isaac still sleeping?"

"Isaac's gone to the country. His father's ailing. Probably won't be back till late tomorrow."

"Oh, I hadn't heard. I'm sorry." But in truth she was vastly relieved. Charles was not likely to prove so unbreachable a barrier as Isaac or both of them together might have been. It had slipped her mind earlier that Charles, too, was quartered in the rooms above the stable.

"And you," he said. "You're feeling fit again, I hope."

"Me?"

He was looking at her so oddly that her confidence in his good will wavered a bit. She was glad that her Joseph—her riding coat fashioned in the style of a man's greatcoat with three tiers of capes—was buttoned snugly up the front to her neck. Otherwise she would have thought he was staring at the purple bruise on her throat.

Her father's first act when he strode into her room an hour after that disastrous scene in the library had been to snatch at the velvet ribbon around her neck and try to wrench her mother's miniature from it. "Hussy! Harlot! How dare you shame the memory of a decent woman by flaunting her image on your person?" If Bethany's own frantic hands had not been able to undo the velvet knot, his furious twistings and

jerks might well have come near to strangling her with the ribbon.

"They said you were taken ill at the party the other night. Been confined to bed for the past two days," Charles said.

So that was the story that had been put about to cover up the truth. No doubt it was what Rachel had been told, too, if she had tried to learn why Bethany had failed to come say good-bye the day after the party. Bethany was just as glad. She would rather confide the actual facts to Rachel herself and without having to deny or correct a flock of distortions in the process. Glancing into the footman's carefully blank face, though, she wondered if he had not also heard whispers that for two days she had been locked in her room, the key turned from the outside, her meals brought up on trays and afterward cleared away by servants forbidden to speak to her. The full scale of her disgrace could hardly have stayed a secret within the household.

"I did have a bad spell for a time," she admitted, "but that is behind me now, thank you." Or will be soon, she added to herself.

She began again to arrange the sack behind the saddle as if she had every expectation that her right to finish the task and ride off into the pre-dawn darkness would be undisputed. "I lost such a lot of time, though, to do some things I promised. That's why I want to get an early start today."

"Seems likely." Charles did not budge from the opening of the stall nor did his tone lose its faint tang of frost. "I hear you'll be getting married soon. To that Major Ainsley. Girls don't have much time to spare when they're making wedding plans."

Bethany flattened her hands on the uncooperative sack and gave the young footman a hard stare across Nellie's back. This item, at least, she wanted understood correctly. "I'm not about to be married. And most particularly not to Major Ainsley, now or ever."

Charles nodded slowly. "Figure he'll be going back to Canada then soon. My grandpa marched up there under Arnold in '77, up to Quebec. Nearly took it from those redcoats, too." He set down the lantern he held and came into the stall. "Here, better let me fasten that on for you so you don't lose it."

Bethany yielded the problem of the sack to him gratefully. To be perfectly accurate, it was not a sack at all but the sheet from her bed, folded in half and then folded double again; the sides firmly basted together to form a sort of envelope. She had sat up most of the night sewing it and afterward had stuffed into it as much of her wardrobe and personal treasures as it would hold—stockings, petticoats, slippers, scarves, two dresses, and what few pieces of jewelry she owned. Those possessions that would not fit inside had been left behind, and she did not expect to see them ever again.

She swallowed against a pang of homesickness that was totally unexpected. What was there to regret in a home that had driven her to a plan of action as desperate as this? A plan the first step of which had been to consent—seem to consent—late yesterday to the marriage her father and Christiana had been urging on her for two days.

"And no tears about it, mistress," Phillips Herbert had decreed. "You can count yourself damned lucky Major Ainsley is a man of honor enough to offer for you. I'll confess I had hoped for better for you. You could have fairly well had your pick of family and fortune in New England if you had wished—but not anymore. You've managed matters so no respectable man would even be seen in public with you now."

He had refused to listen, no matter what she had tried to say. Her attempts to explain the events in the library were lashed to tatters by the fury of his accusations. Her one effort to reveal that Christiana was behind everything was shaken to silence by her father's hands clamped swiftly on her shoulders. "I will listen to none of this. Will you add viciousness and slander to your shame?"

On that, he had tramped out, locking her in and declaring she should speak to no one and no one should speak to her until she had had ample time to meditate on her wickedness and come to her senses. The key and the privilege of being Bethany's sole link with the world beyond her room were given to Christiana upon Christiana's request.

"It's no good turning your back on me, dear child," she had said, drawing a chair to the tumbled bed where Bethany still huddled among the pillows beyond reach of the afternoon sun streaming through the windows. "You have only yourself to blame for last night, haven't you?"

"Have I?" Bethany lifted her face from the enveloping pillows to glare at her.

Christiana's curls bobbed in a rueful shake of her head. "One could blame Francis, somewhat, I suppose, for drinking so much as to forsake his better judgment when a passionate young girl lured him away from the party and flung herself on him. But most men are inclined to be a bit foolish when in their cups."

"That's not true. I didn't lure him. I'd have sooner lured a toad. He knows that. You know it, too."

"Perhaps." Christiana smiled serenely. "But that's not what is important, is it—what you and I and Francis know? It's what everyone else *believes* that matters, don't you see. What your father in particular believes."

Bethany shifted her legs beneath the quilted satin of the counterpane and sat up straighter. "I see that you have managed everything to suit your own purpose."

"Quite so." Christiana inclined her head gracefully. "I consider it more agreeable than letting you suit yours. I should have preferred not to have a scandal occur under my own roof, of course, but you made it unavoidable—and so easy. You shouldn't try to be clever, sweetheart; you haven't the knack for it. You were so full of righteousness yesterday evening and so pleased with yourself for the mischief you were plotting to make that I had merely to watch and wait until you provided Francis and me the opportunity to arrange our final little drama."

There was something quelling about such utter frankness. "Aren't you afraid I will tell this to my father?" Bethany asked to bolster her damaged morale.

Christiana's brows moved upward in delicate surprise. "I thought you already had told him. Or tried to. I thought you understood the difference your father sees in the word of an erring and unrepentant daughter and that of a loving and dutiful wife." Her laugh was as merry as though she had been told a delightful joke, but she held up a staying hand before Bethany's next thought was fully formed. "A repentant daughter, however, in your father's eyes, would be nothing less than one who consents to salvage his pride and the tatters of her reputation by marrying the gentleman who has stepped forward to do the right thing by her."

It was a neat circle they had drawn around her, Francis and Christiana, a circle that would bind her more tightly whichever way she turned. "I won't have him," Bethany burst out furiously. "Never in this world. I'll refuse to speak the vows in front of the minister if I must."

"Don't be silly. No one intends to force you to do anything." Christiana rose, brushing the creases from her skirt. "But I should give the question serious thought if I were you. You are a proud girl, Bethany, extremely proud. It's mainly your pride that's smarting now, I fancy, rather than any great moral indignation. You set considerable store by reputation and respectability, and your 'rightful' place in the world, and you stand to lose every one of those precious things unless you become Mrs. Francis Ainsley very soon."

Bethany did give the question serious thought all that evening and again in the morning as she paced the confines of her room, working to relax the painful stiffening of her legs and back where her father in his first fury had switched her with a birch rod.

Her future in Boston did indeed promise to be bleak if she refused to do penance for her fall from grace by marrying the man who had cold-bloodedly compromised her. But what future was there for her if she must live in a hollow shell of respectability built of trickery, deceit, and contempt, forever striving to show the world the virtuously domesticated front it expected while nothing but bitter emptiness lay behind that front? How could she spend the rest of her life sharing her bed with a man who would far rather be in Christiana's? Who might, in fact, often have just come from there? Yes, and whose presence in that other bed she'd find preferable to having to endure his touch herself. It was not simply her pride that had been pricked by the revelations of Francis Ainsley's true character; it was the iridescent image of the man she had daydreamed him to be, a man she could perhaps love. The reality that remained inspired no more feeling in her than the greasy spot left by a broken bubble.

She was proud, as Christiana had said. But her pride struck deeper than the shallow levels Christiana had supposed. She could not bend herself to the hypocrisy of marrying only to appease her father's and Boston's sensibilities. She would not

let herself be reduced by Christiana and Francis to a mere object like a key to a secret door or a cash box. But what else could she do? Why, oh, why couldn't they have allowed her to go west with Rachel?

That was when the plan had sprung into her mind almost wholly formed in every detail. She had pondered and polished it the rest of the day, and when her father came home that evening she was ready to do what she must to gain her freedom: humble herself to her father, ask his pardon, reluctantly consent to the marriage, and inadvertently but fortunately burst into tears. She realized how fortunate the tears were when she glimpsed the change in Christiana's expression. Christiana had been slightly skeptical of a suddenly humbled Bethany; she was convinced, not to say gratified, by a Bethany who was obviously miserable.

The result was that Bethany had been admitted to supper in the dining room with Christiana and Phillips Herbert, had been obliged to spend a subdued hour in the company of Francis under the scrutiny of both Christiana and Phillips, and had received custody of the key to her own room once more.

And as a result of that, she was here in the stable at this hour of the morning, and no one suspected it but Charles, who gave a grunt of satisfaction now as he tested the moorings of her sack. "There. I doubt you'll lose that even in a hurricane."

"Thank you, Charles. I appreciate it," she said with more feeling than she ought to. It seemed like such a long time since anyone had done her an uncomplicated kindness.

She was tempted to confide her plans to him as he led Nellie outside for her. A few days ago she might have done just that, but if Christiana had impressed anything on her, it was the price of overconfidence. She tried not to wince in front of Charles as he helped her into her saddle, but it would be a while yet before the welts left by the birch rod were only a bad memory.

"Charles . . ." She hesitated, gathering up her reins.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"There's no need to tell anyone I've gone out this morning unless you're asked."

He nodded. "No need at all, as I see it."

Bethany restrained an impulse to press a coin into his hand for his trouble. Something warned her that he was doing her a favor, not a paid service, and that payment might damage the fragile comradeship between them. Besides, she must be careful to make no gesture that would place more significance on her actions than was absolutely necessary. She lifted the reins, and set her mind to the task of guiding Nellie out of the stable yard to the street as quietly as possible.

To be sure, Charles could hardly suppose she was off on a run-of-the-mill errand at this time of day with such a bulging sack tied behind her saddle, but even he would not be prepared to guess the enormity of her plan. Perhaps he thought she was headed for a friend's home, there to seek refuge until matters at home were calmer. That was what she was counting on their thinking in the house, too, when her absence was discovered. There would be a frantic scurrying for a time, discreet but urgent inquiries dispatched to various homes in the town and on its fringes. Never would they imagine that she and Nellie were on their way to join the Pages on their journey to Fort Dearborn.

Dawn was graying between the dark blocks of the houses along the street, etching the shadowy trees into black silhouettes. A bird piped a trill of inquiring notes from a bush on the Common.

Bethany curbed an urge to nudge Nellie into a run. People in the houses would soon be stirring awake, but she must not attract attention by riding too fast. If she had not been afraid of missing her way in the dark or, worse, laming Nellie by riding her into an unseen pothole on the road, she would have set out an hour earlier to take advantage of the covering night. Now they must simply do the best they could to appear as if they were indeed on a commonplace errand until they were out of town. She regretted her choice of scarlet for her new riding habit. In another half hour it would be so visible and so easy to remember.

Beacon Hill, Boston Common, King's Chapel Church in whose graveyard her mother lay buried—one by one they slipped away into the background beneath the steady cllop of hooves on cobbles. Other hooves were ringing here and there on the stones of other streets. Cart wheels began a rumble in

the near distance. Bethany was a little dismayed that the town's life should be getting under way already; it was long before her usual rising time and, she had supposed, that of anyone else except for servants, who did have to rise somewhat earlier. But she found herself welcoming the sounds, for they made her presence less conspicuous.

Her heartbeat quickened and quickened again as the realization of what she was daring to do grew on her. Rachel and Lyle Page had a day's start of her. They had left yesterday morning on the first leg of their journey while Bethany was still a prisoner in her own room. But they were traveling by coach, and the lumbering pace of a stagecoach would not carry it the same distance a rider on horseback could accomplish in the same time. She was gambling that once on the open road where Nellie could really stretch her legs, she could well catch up to the Pages by the end of the day.

Male voices and the squeak of a pump handle being worked reached the street now from the yard behind a tavern. Bethany turned her head and fixed her eyes on the tip of Nellie's right ear until they were safely beyond the place. She had been given to understand by Christiana that Francis had removed himself and his belongings to lodgings in a tavern the very night of Bethany's disgrace, there to remain in gentlemanly seclusion until his offer to right his wrong was accepted, but Bethany did not know which of Boston's several taverns he had chosen. What she did know was that during his period of supposed solitude she had distinctly heard his voice and laughter through her locked door on three different occasions, always at times when her father was away from the house. If she had needed an extra thrust to set her escape plan in motion, that knowledge had supplied it.

And incredibly, she *was* escaping. Here and there someone glanced at her as she rode by—a man unlocking the door of a shop; a woman hurrying into a side street, a towel-covered basket on her arm; a boy heaping his arms with wood in a side yard—but no one challenged her, no one tried to stop her. Perhaps with the ungainly bundle riding behind her, they took her for a farm wife bringing produce of some sort into town for the early marketers, or perhaps they were simply too absorbed in their own daybreak chores to worry much about

the business of anyone else. In any case, she was out of Boston and cantering on the open road, free and clear, by the time the sun gleamed up over the horizon.

The stage route was familiar to her, at least the first dozen or so miles of it. Her Herbert cousins lived on a farm that adjoined the road at one point, and she had driven with her father and mother to visit them on a number of occasions in the past. She was confident of every dip and bend ahead, almost of every rock and tree. The tension of the last few days unwound in her like a released spring, changing her fears to a sense of exhilaration. Imagine Rachel's face when Bethany came trotting up alongside the coach this evening, or better, when she walked into the common room of the inn where the passengers would be spending the night. What a reunion they were going to have! What a lot there would be to tell!

Nevertheless, she was not comfortable about the farm wagons that began to appear more frequently on the road. If their destination was Boston, might they not remember and report seeing Bethany should her father or Christiana think to make inquiries among the people who came into town this morning? An immediate pursuit could still defeat her.

Twice she turned Nellie into a side lane to avoid meeting an oncoming wagon. Once, when no lane was convenient, she cut across a field, trusting that an observer would take her for some farmer's daughter off to pay a call on a neighbor over the hill.

Another time she drew off into a stand of trees when she glimpsed a wagon rounding a bend ahead. While she waited for it to pass, the thud of hoofbeats approaching from the other direction set her pulse to jumping again. Had someone been following her? Was this the pursuit she had feared? She had been so intent on what lay before her that she had neglected to keep a sharp watch behind.

Rider and wagon met directly in front of her, the rider going by on the wagon's far side. For a dizzy moment she thought she knew him, or should know him—an acquaintance or employee of her father's maybe—but she had retreated too deeply into the trees to see his face clearly, besides which the low slant of his hat brim hid half of it. Then, drawing in a

steadying breath, she was just as sure she did not know him. Furthermore, he was showing precious little interest in the landscape for a man in pursuit of anyone who had vanished from his sight a minute or two ago, for he never glanced toward her side of the road as he rode by, and he certainly was not urging his mount to break out of the easy jog that appeared to suit them both.

All the same, the brief scare prompted Bethany to linger among the trees until he was well ahead of her along the road. She dismounted and led Nellie to drink at a brook that was gurgling farther back in the grove. Bethany had a drink herself from cupped hands, and was reminded sharply that she had had no breakfast this morning and had been in too great a turmoil of emotions to swallow much supper last night.

She undid an end of her sack and pulled from it a scarf in which she had wrapped the apple and chunk of cheese she'd asked Nancy to bring her at bedtime. It had seemed too great a risk to provide against today's hunger in any other fashion, either by trying to sneak a fish cake or bread slice from the supper table unseen or by dallying in the kitchen to scavenge what morsels she could.

Bethany meant only to nibble some of the cheese and perhaps eat half the apple, saving the rest for when the sun should have passed the midday mark, but even as she made the resolution, the cheese was gone and she was biting into the apple as if it were the first food she had ever tasted. She scooped up more water to fill in the empty places that remained, then secured the end of the sack again and remounted. Luckily, there were plenty of coins in her purse—her father had never failed her in terms of supplying an ample allowance—so she could pay for a meal at a farmhouse or an inn later on. But not until she was safely beyond the Herbert farm and the houses in its neighborhood. Once her father was satisfied she was no longer in Boston, his next guess was likely to be that she had fled to her cousins for refuge, and a hunt for her there would be under way at once.

Bethany passed the farm safely and in the hour that followed met only one farm wagon, a cartload of chickens, and a dangle-legged boy riding an ambling plowhorse bareback. From now on, she could relax some of her wariness, for she

reasoned that she would be encountering mostly people on local business taking them from one farm to another, and those few still aiming for Boston would be such a goodly while reaching it that they would be of little danger to her.

By afternoon she was farther from home than she had ever been in her life. The Herbert farm was miles behind her, and the territory she was passing through, although spread out in the same general pattern of pastures, fields, and woods, was wholly unfamiliar. She had also been riding longer than she ever had before. Her stomach was complaining of emptiness, a cramp was crawling up her right calf, the bruises from her father's switch were awakening again after a spell of blessed numbness, and still there was nothing to tell her if she was any closer to that elusive stagecoach than she had been when she started.

A cluster of buildings stood where the road dipped into a hollow and split into two. A flatbed wagon and team, three other horses, and a broken cart were ranged in front of the largest building, a structure of squared logs with a swinging sign above the door carved and painted to represent a pine tree.

A woman in a shapeless bonnet and a gown of butternut homespun stopped sweeping the stoop of her house to stare at Bethany's fashionable habit and jaunty hat with its graceful white plume curling nearly to her nose. Plainly ladies of Bethany's caliber, particularly young ladies on horseback, unescorted and transporting their worldly goods behind them in a linen sheet, were not a common occurrence in this hamlet.

Bethany ignored the woman, her eyes on the tavern. Here was the promise of a filling meal and information. But it was less easy to ignore the stares of a pair of loungers seated on a shaft of the crippled cart. One lowered the jug he had tipped to his lips and emitted a thin whistle that was unmistakable in its meaning. The other uttered a cackle of agreement. Neither gave the impression of having seen soap or comb in a month.

"Looking for someone, little lady?" the first man asked as Bethany's glance evaded them to scan the rest of the yard.

"Glad to be of service to you, any kind of service you like," the cackler offered, unfolding upward into a grinning tree of a man. "Not all alone, are you?"

Bethany flung him a look of disdain that froze him in his tracks. In that instant, she touched her heel to Nellie and swung back into the center of the road. Without pausing to ponder, she chose the fork to the left, which seemed to lead more directly westward. She did not draw Nellie down to a walk until the delighted laughter of the men had died on the wind and the hamlet was out of sight.

What had changed her mind about entering the tavern, however, was not the louts in the dooryard. Nothing in her sheltered experience had led her to imagine that such men, no matter how crude or repellent, would actually dare to force their attentions on a person of her background and breeding in any physical way.

No, it was the second of the three horses tied to a peeled sapling rail—a tall black with one white stocking. She had already seen that horse another time today. He belonged to the rider she had thought she recognized this morning. But worse, her memory had given a lurch of recognition just now that left her positive she had seen that animal before today. Recollection of exactly when or where eluded her for the moment, but the conviction was too strong to dismiss. The man's business on this road might be totally innocent and in no way connected with her or her father, but she had no intention of gambling on the good will of anyone who knew her until she was safely under the protection of Rachel and her husband.

This resolution carried her onward for the length of a mile, but at last she could no longer ignore the protests of her tired muscles. She kicked off her stirrups, slid to the ground, and sat on a sun-warmed stone to rest while Nellie snatched at blades of spring grass by the roadside. The stagecoach could not be much farther off. The road was growing rougher by the mile—more rutted, more uneven, more plagued by holes and frost-tilted rocks. No wheeled vehicle could advance very fast without being shaken to pieces in the attempt.

Bethany was stiff when she rose to her feet again, too stiff to remount at once. Leading Nellie, she walked for a considerable way until the slowness of the pace drove her to climb back into the saddle with the aid of a convenient stone wall.

The afternoon was undergoing a change. Clouds were be-

gunning to scud across the sun, darkening the countryside for seconds, then minutes, before breaking apart. They awoke little spurts of wind from first one quarter, then another, spurts sharp with a reminder that snow still lingered in patches in the woods and on the shaded slopes of fields. Bethany hunched her shoulders as a gust lifted the capes of her Joseph and tugged at her plume. She would have urged Nellie to a quick trot, but the road here was a mire of soft mud that did not lend itself to haste.

Nellie disliked mud. She also disliked storms. Her ears pricked forward in nervous attention when a rumble of thunder rolled along the horizon.

"There, girl. There, girl. It's all right," Bethany soothed, running her hand along the horse's tense neck. "We'll stop at the very next inn we come to, I promise. We won't care who's there first. And you'll have a good dinner of oats and a safe refuge from the rain where you can rest yourself till it's time to go on. It can't be much farther now."

And if no inn presented itself soon enough, she would beg shelter at whatever farmhouse happened to be close by, she told herself. Nellie had been rescued from a barn set afire by lightning when she was a colt, and she had never forgotten her fear, or so Bethany had been advised when her father bought the horse for her three years ago. Bethany had too much faith in her own horsemanship to be unduly concerned, but she herself was somewhat unnerved by the prospect of a strange road, darkening skies, and a skittish mount.

Then don't think of it, she counseled herself. Think of a blazing fire and a huge bowl of steaming chowder and that maybe the next inn is the one you are looking for, the one where you'll find Rachel and Lyle stopping for the night.

Half an hour later the clouds closed over the sun in earnest, and the first sprinkling of rain began to fall. Woods lined the road on both sides. Not an inn or a house or a sign of human habitation was visible anywhere.

Nellie picked up her pace without being asked. Nervous ripples chased one another over her skin as if each raindrop were a needle. A flicker of lightning sent her in a sidelong dance from one edge of the road to the other.

Bethany crooned reassurance to her and fought to keep the

horse's head up while Nellie fought to work the bit between her teeth. The rain increased from a patter to a drumming. Mud splashed up at every step, and the wind whipped the white plume across Bethany's eyes. She flinched, and lost the battle for Nellie's head, but she did not lose her reins or her seat as Nellie plunged on through the long aisle of trees.

The lightning flash and the thunderclap, both arcing from horizon to horizon, were almost simultaneous as the woods gave way to more open ground. Instinct rather than thought freed Bethany's foot from the stirrup in the instant Nellie reared, kicking and squealing, then slipping in the mud and crashing over on her side.

Bethany landed clear of her in a thatch of last year's weeds and rolled to a safe distance. She lay still a few seconds, waiting for the whirl in her head to subside. This was by no means her first fall from a horse, and she was only shaken, not seriously hurt.

Nevertheless, tears mixed with the rain running down her cheeks as she scrambled to her knees and, more slowly, to her feet—tears of anger, frustration, and weariness. She would never catch up to the stage at this rate. And if she didn't, what then?

Desperately, she turned toward Nellie. The mare had regained her feet, too, and stood, sides heaving and eyes showing white.

"Whoa—whoa—whoa," Bethany singsonged, schooling herself to advance one unhurried step at a time. "Stand, Nellie. Pretty Nellie. Whoa."

Nellie let her approach to within a yard, then snorted and sidled off. Bethany followed, coaxing, not hurrying. One step at a time, one more step . . . Now the dangling reins were within reach.

The mare tossed her head and sidestepped again. Bethany's fingers closed on air. She lunged forward, making a wild grab. Nellie spun around and galloped off across the unkempt meadow.

How long or how often they repeated the performance, Bethany did not know. It seemed like forever. The trailing skirt of her habit dragged and tangled itself on weed stalks when she tried to run. Her petticoats, growing more sodden

and heavy by the minute, wrapped themselves around her legs, causing her to stumble and once to sprawl jarringly on her hands and knees.

She was in the center of the meadow, rubbing a mud-stained glove across her eyes and sobbing like a child when suddenly there were two horses instead of one. A rider on a tall, dark horse was coming in toward Nellie from the side. Nellie circled away to the left.

"Can you head her off?" the man shouted to Bethany.

Bethany bundled skirts and petticoats up in both hands and sprinted to where she could jump for the reins if Nellie held to her course.

The mare spied her an instant too soon and veered right. But the man and the black horse were there, keeping pace—the black horse with the one white stocking. A cloak flung back from the shoulders, a swift snaking arm, and the man had a secure grip on Nellie's bridle.

Bethany set her teeth in her lower lip to control its quivering and summoned all her pride to hold back fresh tears. Her pride at least remained to her if it must be that everything else was gone. For in recognizing the black horse, she had remembered the path on Boston Common where she had first seen it, and knew its rider even before he was close enough for her to see his features in the gray light.

"Thank you. I'm deeply obliged, Mr. Stark," she said as he brought the horses to her.

"Your servant, Miss Herbert."

He made no immediate move to hand the bridle over, but sat frowning down at her. Bethany stole a downward glance at herself. She presented a sorry spectacle, as sorry as she felt—mud-stained from toe to shoulder, rain-soaked, a rip in her right glove, and her pert plume a bedraggled twig broken in two places and pasted to the wet curve of her cheek.

"I know you will consider it none of my business, but would you mind telling me what the devil you are doing here?" he asked.

Bethany pushed the dangling feather away from her face. "I should think you must have a fairly good idea. This is my father's doing, your being here, isn't it?"

"Your father?" Blankness was replaced by an edge of

grimness in his voice. "It is hardly likely that Phillips Herbert would consider employing me on any business of his. The only circumstance less likely is that I would accept the employment if he did. We did not find much in each other to admire."

"You mean your reason for being on this road— You haven't been on a hunt for me all day?"

His mouth twisted in a wry smile. "At the risk of wounding your tender vanity, I assure you I had no smallest suspicion that you, too, might be traveling this road until I saw you trying to recapture your horse a few minutes ago. I have had no intention, desire, or cause to seek you out anywhere for any reason." He swung out of his saddle and stepped to the ground. "If you will permit me to help you mount, we can both be about our separate affairs without further loss of time."

Bethany disdained the hand he extended. "I can manage quite well, thank you. I've never ridden Nellie in a storm before. From now on I shall know what to expect."

She hated herself for making excuses—as if it mattered to her what he thought, or as if what he thought of her could be altered by excuses. It was just that she had had no one to talk to all day and that something in her was glad of a little human companionship, even the companionship of a human as opinionated and arrogant as this man. A little would be quite enough, however.

She gripped the stirrup and readied herself to step up into the saddle. It was a feat she had accomplished unaided scores of times in the past, one of the first her grandfather had insisted on her mastering when he taught her to ride. But her knees were trembling, her whole body was, whether from the rain chill, a day of fasting, or in reaction to her relief at finding she was not being pursued, and her legs would not cooperate. Bethany tried again. Thunder grumbled overhead, and Nellie shifted restively. Again the attempt was a failure.

Those intent blue eyes of Joshua Stark's were on her, missing nothing. He spoke a quieting word to the mare, and stooped above Bethany. The next thing she knew, he had lifted her up bodily, cradling her in his arms as though such a liberty were his God-given right.

"Mr. Stark!" she protested, but suddenly her teeth were chattering, too.

Coolly and with great deliberateness, he set her in her saddle. "I think you could use a bracer against this weather," he said, turning to his own saddlebags. "So could I."

He produced a flask and a tin cup and poured her a generous dose of pale liquid. "Here, drink this. Toss it down. Don't sip it."

The liquid was whiskey. It had a raw, harsh taste to her tongue, which was accustomed to wine and brandy, and it burned its way down her throat like liquefied pepper. She coughed and choked.

"Drink it," Stark said sternly. And she drank it.

A glowing warmth blossomed along the whiskey's route and was already spreading upward through her as he poured a portion for himself. When he mounted and gathered his reins, her hands were steady enough to curb a bid from Nellie to lunge sideways. But Nellie, with another horse for company, was somewhat steadier, too.

"I trust your destination is nearby," Joshua Stark said as they splashed together into the mud of the road. "You have a place in mind to spend the night?"

"When I catch up to the coach for Albany. And my friend. Then I'll be all right." Her voice reached her through a faint buzzing in her head that was not unpleasant. "It can't be much farther."

"Your friend departed by stagecoach and left you to follow on horseback alone? Your friend must be fond of you indeed."

Bethany could not fathom his expression except that it hardened and something in it had gone shut.

"We wanted to go together," she said in Rachel's defense. "If they would have let us do as we planned . . . But my father, my stepmother . . ." She paused and blinked raindrops from her lashes. What was the use of going into all that?

"They consider you have an overly warm nature," he suggested, "so you and your friend determined on this course to prove them wrong."

She was not sure if he laughed or if it was a low mutter of thunder she heard. She did not care much, really. Regardless

of what he said or what he thought, he was secure in his knowledge of himself and of the road. After a day of doubts, misgivings, and fears, it was good to have a man's strength to lean on for a while.

She only looked at him, then bowed her head again against the rain and offered no objection when he said, "You won't be catching up to the Albany stagecoach tonight unless it is stopping over in Concord. You would be well advised to go no farther than the inn there as I intend to do, even if it means depriving your 'friend' of the delights of your many charms for one more night."

Chapter IV

The low-ceilinged, upstairs room to which the innkeeper's wife led Bethany boasted a bare floor, a washstand, a straight-backed wooden chair, and a bed covered with a rough wool blanket. It was a far cry from the velvet-draped and satin-upholstered surroundings Bethany was used to, but for just that reason she found the cramped little room reassuring. Boston was a long way behind her now.

Furthermore, the room was dry, a snug refuge from the rain she could hear hammering on the roof. And it was private. She had been all too aware of the glances that had followed her across the common room downstairs a few minutes ago. Neither had she missed the fact that there was not one woman among the handful of booted and crudely dressed teamsters and farmers warming themselves in front of the huge fireplace. None but the innkeeper's well-rounded wife, who set down a pair of mugs before two burly, mud-spattered men before she came over to Bethany, wiping her hands on her apron and clucking like a mother hen.

She was still clucking as Bethany lowered the sodden bundle of her belongings to the floor at the foot of the bed and straightened to lift off her hat, which was sending runnels of rainwater down her neck.

"Such a shame, that pretty little hat. That plume's broke right in two, isn't it?"

Bethany turned the hat in her hands. It was indeed a sorry-looking article, particularly the plume. Plainly, the milliner had not anticipated its being worn in bad weather.

"I suppose it will serve as well without the feather," she said ruefully.

"Why don't you give it to me and let me see what I can do toward setting it right," the woman suggested. "And that wet garb, too. The sooner you get out of that, the better. I'll take it down to dry at the kitchen fire."

Bethany gave her a wan smile of appreciation. "That would be very kind of you."

She hesitated, waiting for the woman to withdraw so she could shed her wet garments in private, but the woman showed no inclination to go.

"Not kind of me at all. It's no more than what I'd hope someone else might be doing for my girl should she be caught by a storm on the road. She and her new husband packed up lock, stock, and barrel two weeks ago and started off for Pennsylvania."

"Oh?" Bethany felt obliged to say something and she could think of nothing else. She undid the buttons of her coat and, remembering the low bruise on her throat, modestly turned her back as she peeled her arms free of the clammy sleeves. "Are they—ah—traveling by wagon?"

It was of no consequence to her how the couple traveled, but she hoped the question would divert the woman's attention somewhat from her.

"Not him." The innkeeper's wife voiced the words with such disdain that it left little doubt of her low opinion of her son-in-law. "He sold everything they couldn't pack on horseback. Not that that amounted to a whole lot to sell. They'll buy new the other side of the mountains, he says, and the land's cheaper there and more fertile."

So then, a traveler on horseback, even a female, her worldly goods in a bundle behind her saddle, might not be quite as uncommon a sight as Bethany had feared. Perhaps those who saw her pass by would not find the event such cause for comment that their wonder would reach back to Boston.

She let her coat drop to the floor and pulled the rough linen towel from the washstand to mop away the moisture that still trickled down her face and neck. "I've heard it said a great many are moving west these days."

"The grass is always greener on the other side for some, but a woman's got no choice but to follow where her man leads, and it's the men nine times out of ten that have the itching feet." She gathered the coat from the floor and gave it a shake that sent sprinkles of raindrops flying through the room. "Yours now, where's he dragging you off to?"

"Mine?" Bethany raised blank eyes above the edge of the

towel before she realized the woman assumed Joshua Stark and Bethany must be husband and wife. "Oh!"

The woman laughed. "Not quite used to it yet, are you? I judged the minute I set eyes on you two that you weren't married long. Not on your wedding trip, are you?"

The knowing note in her chuckle sent a wash of indignant color into Bethany's face. "No. Oh, no!"

But the new caution she had learned from Christiana laid a warning seal on her lips before she said more. Better to weigh each word first and not be too free with explanations. Who could tell what scrap of information, carelessly dropped, might yet betray her within reach of her father's long arm should one of his agents appear at this inn tomorrow, asking questions?

To soften the force of her denial, she added, "I've always thought of a wedding trip as a happy occasion. This journey isn't."

"Oh, my dear child!" The woman was instantly full of sympathy and redoubled curiosity. "Not an illness in the family, I trust?"

"No . . ." Inspiration struck Bethany. She heaved a sigh as she lowered the crumpled towel to the washstand. "Not family, but a very dear friend. She—she's leaving us, and she wants me with her."

"Pity, pity. But the Lord works in mysterious ways." The landlady shook her head sadly and then, her curiosity satisfied, became briskly maternal once more. "Good gracious, child, you're all goose pimples. Give me the rest of that outfit and wrap yourself up in something good and warm. I doubt you'd be sorry for a nice, hot dish of tea."

"That would be truly welcome," Bethany admitted. She abandoned modesty and stripped off her skirt and wet shoes as quickly as she could undo the fastenings, eager for the preparation of the tea to be got under way. "I wonder—might I have supper here in the room?"

"Bless you, your man's already seen to that. You just make yourself comfortable, and everything'll be right along presently." The landlady sighed above the bundle of garments in her arms as she went out the door. "I only hope my girl's man is taking as much thought for her."

Bethany was surprised, and a little touched too, by Joshua Stark's thoughtfulness. Perhaps he was not altogether as sour and insensitive as he would like people to believe. After all, he had volunteered his aid, unasked, in recapturing Nellie and, once arrived at the inn, had covered Bethany's lack of experience in the ways of travel by arranging for this private room for her. Maybe he had also supposed himself doing her a service before when he had rescued her from the trial of having to waltz with Francis Ainsley, even though his behavior on that occasion could not be counted wholly on the plus side. Memory of that demanding kiss in the hallway stirred in her with disquieting vividness. She felt herself blushing, although there was no one to see her.

Quickly she knelt in her petticoats beside her makeshift sack of belongings and busied herself in opening it to examine the condition of the contents. The doubled bedsheet had served as a better weather guard than she might have supposed, probably in part because she had been obliged to ride head on into the storm for most of the way and her body had taken the brunt of the rain that would otherwise have beaten on the sack tied behind her. A number of garments in the uppermost layers were damp enough to warrant unpacking them and draping them over the footboard of the bed and the chair back to dry, but as she dug deeper, she came to a cashmere shawl that was nearly as dry as when she had removed it from her drawer at home.

Shivers ran over her shoulders and down her arms. She could have wished for a fireplace in this little room and a crackling blaze by which to warm the chill from her underclothes. Her chemise in particular clung to her skin like a coat of clammy paint.

A daring impulse seized her. She hesitated, both restrained and emboldened by the strangeness of her surroundings, then peeled off the chemise over her head and cast it across the footboard. Naked now to the waist, she snatched up the shawl and hastily flung it around her lest the landlady return and find her so exposed.

The shawl had been her mother's, and the pledge of comfort and warmth in its soft, ample folds was like the reassurance of a mother's caress. Bethany pulled the edges in a snug

crisscross over her bosom, brought the ends down and around to circle her waist, tied them in a knot behind, and patted the folds into a symmetry that revealed no hint that she was not fully clothed underneath.

She felt suddenly close to her mother as she had not felt in years—here in this unfamiliar room, embarked on this improbable mission, wrapped in this remembered shawl. It was her mother's favorite color, too, a deep blue that had complemented the gold of her hair and the clearness of her skin and darkened the blue of her eyes—those tones and textures that were Bethany's as well.

It crossed Bethany's mind that had she resembled her mother less, matters between herself and her father might have gone better. In the past he had been most inclined to notice and indulge her, she knew, when she modulated her voice in imitation of her mother's or remembered to move with the unhurried smoothness of her mother's tranquil style. She had even fancied—yes, and hoped—that his increasing harshness after the advent of Christiana stemmed in part from a sense of guilt whenever she saw his true wife looking out at him from his child and compared her to the creature he had brought home to fill her place. And his fury on stumbling upon—rather, on being led to—that contrived scene in the library, that terrible, ungoverned fury that was as much like the outrage of a jealous lover as a dishonored father: would it have been the slightest shade more temperate, would he have paused just once to hear her side of the story, had it been a red-haired, freckled Bethany he had discovered in Francis Ainsley's arms and not the image of his first wife?

Bethany drew the shawl tighter around her, the stripes and bruises of the birch rod throbbing once more. Her real sin, then, had been that she was not her mother and never would be. The revelation that she was Bethany, a person quite apart, with passions and impulses and vulnerabilities all very much her own, was what her father could not forgive. Not ever. Even had she bowed to his will and married Francis, it would have counted little as reparation. Her father's intent was to punish her, and a bitter, lifelong punishment that would have been.

No, she had done the right thing in running away. The only

thing. She curled herself up on the bed and folded the woolen blanket over her cold feet. And come to think of it, she had done a rather good job so far of making an escape. Elation began to bubble in her again as she considered how neatly she had put the landlady off the scent. None of what Bethany had said to her was falsehood, either. Whatever conclusions the landlady may have drawn from the phrasing was her own affair.

Bethany's musings were interrupted by a knock at the door. A girl of about twelve entered shyly and as shyly departed, leaving behind a laden supper tray balanced none too securely on a corner of the washstand.

Bethany forgot every other thought but that she had traveled a long, full day with scarcely a morsel of food to sustain her and she was famished. She set water pitcher and basin on the floor to give the tray more room, pulled the chair to the stand, and sat down to a feast of plain fare that was more delicious on this rainy evening than any ten-course dinner she could remember.

Not merely a dish of tea graced the center of the tray but an entire little pewter pot clad in a cheerful red knitted cozy and sending a heartening mist of steam from its spout. More than that, Bethany discovered upon her first sip, the landlady had further provided against any possible bad effects from the rain and cold by generously sweetening the pot with rum.

Alongside the tea pot was a plate of richly browned baked beans still hot from the oven and topped by a chunk of salt pork. Two thick slices of bread lavishly buttered flanked the plate. Above them sat a mound of jelly shimmering a beautifully translucent plum color under the rays of a candle set in the tray's left-hand corner.

Bethany devoured every last mouthful even down to the bean juice on the plate, which she mopped up with the crusts of her bread. She finished off the final spoonful of jelly and washed it down with the last swallow of tea.

A tumbler of what appeared to be rather murky water was the one thing that remained on the tray untouched, and since she was still thirsty, she tasted that, too. It was not water but whiskey, and not much diluted, either. Coughing, swallowing hard, she set the tumbler down. But it was not as raw as the drink Joshua Stark had pressed on her from his flask. Or was she growing used to it?

She sipped again, more carefully this time, and then again. If at all possible, she wanted to run no risk of offending the landlady by leaving anything on the tray to suggest her hospitality had not been fully appreciated.

It entered her head that perhaps she should have been more honest with the landlady about Joshua Stark. What was the reaction going to be when the supposedly married couple rode off in separate directions tomorrow, and very likely at separate hours? But if someone should come asking for her yet tonight, demanding to know if a young girl, alone and single, had passed this way, it would be worth the small deception ten times over for the landlady to be able to swear in good faith that no such girl had stopped here. Whatever complications might arise from it tomorrow, tomorrow would be soon enough to face them.

Tomorrow . . . Bethany yawned and drained the tumbler. Her shivers had ceased long since. She was warm and well fed, and now a lovely languor was stealing through her. She glanced at the bed, which had seemed so plain when she came in, and found that it had become the most inviting couch a weary traveler could wish. Her eyelids were heavy, her head pleasantly light.

She set the candle on a shelf above the stand and, not knowing what else to do with it, slid the tray out of the way under the bed. Then she rummaged a hairbrush from among her belongings, and sat on the edge of the bed to treat herself to the luxury of thoroughly brushing her hair before yielding to sleep.

A sharp rap at the door halted the brush in mid-stroke. "Yes?" she called without moving.

The door was locked, she knew. The key lay on the shelf beside the candle. She was not sure she wanted to unlock it at this point and present herself to curious eyes with her hair streaming over her shoulders, her feet bare, and the rest of her garbed only in petticoats and a shawl.

Before she could decide, a key ground in the lock from the other side, the knob turned, and the door was pushed wide open.

"Mr. Stark!" Bethany sprang to her feet as his dark, piratical figure crowded the room even before he bent his head to clear the low doorway.

"Please, don't disturb yourself, Mrs. Stark."

So he knew. And knowing, was he here to denounce her? Her eyes slid past him to the glow of a tallow dip behind him and the broad smile of the landlady.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," the woman told her, "but since the gentleman needed a light up the stairs anyway, I thought I'd just come along and take away the supper things if you've finished."

"Oh, yes, I've finished. Very much so." Bethany caught her breath on a small laugh and retrieved the tray from under the bed as if this were the sort of thing she did every day. "That jelly was delicious. Almost too pretty to eat."

The landlady beamed as brightly as her candle. "I thought you'd find it to your taste. Mostly I don't dish it up except for something special—somebody sick, or a celebration, or someone wet through like you."

"It's delicious," Bethany repeated. "I've never tasted any quite like it."

The landlady lowered her voice. "Madeira, that's the secret. I make it with Madeira. That brings out the color and sharpens the tang of the grapes."

"I appreciate it. Believe me, I do." Bethany was keeping a watch on Joshua Stark from the corner of her eye, fearful that at any word he would break in and unmask her.

There was nothing to reassure her in the fact that his gaze was wandering the room as if he was totally indifferent to the conversation. She was acutely conscious of her personal garments spread out in plain view everywhere. The sole defense she could think of was to chatter on without pause until both he and the landlady wearied of the nonsense and took their leave.

"It's your family receipt, then? I suppose that means your daughter took it with her."

"That'd be like her: take a thing like that along and leave her good down featherbed behind. Too bulky to carry, she said. Though where she'll find Madeira, let alone grapes, the far side of those mountains beats me." The landlady's sigh flickered the candle flame.

Joshua Stark shifted his weight from one foot to the other, scuffing a boot on the bare floor and swinging the pair of saddlebags slung over his arm.

"Perhaps it won't be so bad as you think. Beyond the mountains, that is," Bethany said hastily. She did wish this good wife would not make the West sound quite as much like the unfinished end of creation. Western Pennsylvania was nowhere near as great a distance to be going as Illinois country and remote Fort Dearborn.

The landlady put a hand to her frilled cap to straighten it, although it was already settled as precisely as though she had stopped in front of a mirror just a minute ago to adjust it. "Red Injuns, wild beasts, and early graves; that's all I've heard tell of from those that been there. Plus a lot of day-dream foolishness from those that have a mind to go but never saw a lick of it yet."

Joshua Stark set the saddlebags down against the wall with a thud that caused both women to jump. "Your pardon, ladies," he murmured.

That too-familiar edge of mockery was in his voice. Bethany tensed, but the landlady chose to read his tone as humorous.

"No, it's your pardon should be asked, and I know it," she laughed. "Get me started going on about my girl, and my husband says it's like the ice going out of the river in the spring. He's right, too, as your young wife can bear witness. But I'll wish you good night now and leave you in peace."

She was backing into the passage as she spoke, using one hand to balance the tray, the other to draw the door shut after her.

Bethany started forward to catch the door before it could latch. She was all at once as eager to prolong the woman's visit by any means as she had been eager a moment earlier to see her go.

"Oh, but—"

The latch clicked home. A long arm extended across the door barred it from being opened again as effectively as any lock.

"The time for 'buts' is past," Joshua said. He sidestepped to lean his shoulders against the door and glowered down at her. "It's time now that you and I came to an understanding."

Bethany's chin lifted. She would not be cowed by him. "What I understand, sir, is that you have no business intruding on me in my room at this hour."

"Intrude?" His black brows crooked upward in exaggerated surprise. "A strange term for a young wife to use toward a man who only wants to enjoy his rightful bed—and his new bride. You are a *new* bride, aren't you? I find myself vague as to the exact moment upon which we became wed, so you will pardon me if I appear confused on a few other details as well."

Bethany retreated a step. "We are not wed, and you know it."

"And you'll be astonished to learn, I suppose, that everyone else under this roof is of quite a different opinion? That would be a natural mistake for most of them, of course. Young ladies don't usually ride about the country on extended journeys accompanied only by chance acquaintances they meet on the road. It was my impression, however, that our good landlady for one not merely assumes: she has been actively encouraged in her misassumption."

Half a dozen defenses raced through Bethany's head, none of which promised to establish her on any firmer ground. It was safer to launch an attack on the enemy's camp instead. "Where I met you, Mr. Stark, was in my father's own drawing room, where you were presented to me as an honorable and respected gentleman."

"Was I? By no one who knew me intimately, I am sure." His short laugh was as quelling as the black scowl that immediately replaced it. "I recall that on that occasion, too, you proceeded without the least compunction to use me for your own purposes. I do not like being manipulated, Miss Herbert. Most particularly, I do not like being made a tool for carrying out another man's private sports."

"Another man? Who?" she asked, genuinely lost. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Don't you?" He laughed again, an ugly, twisted sound, and took a step toward her. "Yes, you are an innocent little creature, aren't you? Pure as the driven snow."

Bethany backed away from him to the foot of the bed. He was referring to that scene in the library, of course. He still believed she had flirted with him to make Francis jealous. How was it, she wondered, that everyone but her—he, her father, Christiana, Francis—claimed to have a right to anger about that evening?

"I think, Mr. Stark, that you have had too much to drink."

The smell of whiskey was strong on his breath.

"I have had enough to drink," he said. "But not too much. There is a significant difference." He sat down on the chair, disregarding the welter of petticoats and skirts hung over its back. "You also think you can keep on playing with fire without getting burned. Another misconception."

Bethany stood dumbfounded as he tugged at his left boot and pulled it off. "Stop! What are you doing?"

"Getting ready for bed." He let the boot fall to the floor and set to work on the right one.

"You don't mean here? You can't. It's impossible." Not for an instant did she believe he was serious. He was trying to frighten her, trying to teach her a lesson. "Not—not while I am in this room."

He dropped the second boot and swept his arm in a wide gesture toward the door. "Please yourself. If you prefer a bench in the common room for the night, in the company of several teamsters who definitely have had too much to drink, go ahead. The door is unlocked."

She edged an uncertain step or two closer to the door. Her fingers were clamped on the hairbrush she still held, as if to relax their grip in the slightest would spell disaster. "I—I'll ask the landlady if she has another bed that I can use. She's taken a special interest in me."

"And how do you propose to explain to her your need for another bed? She may not be quite as sympathetic when she finds you've been playing her for a fool." His eyes moved over her appraisingly and not without appreciation. "On the other hand, if you pursue your errand in that costume, you may stir mein host's sympathies to their core. It's very fetching."

He reached out and smoothed a lock of Bethany's hair down over the front of her shoulder.

Swifter than thought, Bethany swung the hairbrush upward, knocking his hand away. "Don't you touch me. Don't you dare!"

Before the brush could complete the full arc of the swing, her wrist was manacled in a circle of fingers that threatened to crush it. Joshua Stark was on his feet, towering over her. "Try that again, and I'll exercise my husbandly prerogatives

by bending you over my knee and applying that brush where you won't soon forget it."

She bit her lip to hold in a cry of pain. He would wring nothing of that sort from her. Numbness swallowed the pain and deadened her fingers. The brush clattered to the floor.

She forced her eyes to meet his as he released her, staring defiance up at him despite a wash of tears that blurred her vision. "You—you"—her vocabulary woefully wanting in the caliber of epithet the moment demanded, she spat at him one she had heard Charles mutter after the departing back of the head groom one early morning—"bastard."

Joshua Stark's smile—that pirate smile of white teeth against swarthy skin—was almost merry. "That's more like it. A deal closer to the mark than 'honorable and respected gentleman.' "

He turned away from her, unbuttoning his coat and shrugging himself out of it.

Bethany considered a dash for the door to throw herself on the landlady's mercy after all, but he was now between her and the door. The shift of position had appeared casual, but she doubted it was an accident.

Her damaged wrist pressed to her chest, she retreated once more to the footboard of the bed. From there she watched aghast as he undid the fastenings of his shirt and stripped that off, too.

Rarely in her life had she seen a man naked to the waist. Never a man who purported to be a gentleman. But this Joshua Stark was no gentleman, she reminded herself.

She tore her eyes from the mat of black hair that covered his chest and from the hard-muscled contour of shoulders above it. Her heart was racing like a snared rabbit's.

"If you get into this bed, I shall take the blanket and sleep on the floor."

In spite of all her resolution, her voice was small and frightened.

He ran a hand through his thick black hair, studying her. "The fire getting a degree too warm for you?"

She braced herself, an arm wound around the bedpost for extra support, as in two easy strides he crossed the room to where she stood.

He rested his hands lightly on her shoulders. "I haven't quite made up my mind yet what I'm going to do. It's been a long day. Perhaps if you were to give me a sweet, wifely good-night kiss . . ."

She submitted in rigid silence as he stooped his face to hers. His hands slipped from her shoulders to smooth the folds of the shawl along the lines of her spine, but they exerted no pressure against her stubborn resistance. And the kiss was barely more than a brush of his lips across hers. Nothing like that other kiss she remembered, nothing like what she had been steeled to withstand. The tide of panic that had been rising in her began to ebb, but not without dealing her a traitorous little stab of disappointment. But then his exploring hands discovered her bare flesh under the shawl, and slid quickly upward, no longer exploring but laying claim.

"No! No!" She flung herself away from him in an unsuccessful attempt to break free of the arm that encircled her.

"Simply imagine that I'm your British major. You were well enough pleased by his fondlings."

"I never—I didn't—" She was thrusting against his chest with one hand, clawing to shield her breast from his marauding fingers with the other. "You've no right! You can't—" She bent her head suddenly and set her teeth in his shoulder.

"Damn you!" A lift of his arm swept her off as if she were no more than a mosquito. "I'll show you what I can or can't. It's time you woke up to reality."

The breath went from her in a gasp as he pulled her to him. His mouth on hers this time was a demand, relentless and hard. Her struggles to twist away, to kick, to push, somehow only pinioned her the tighter.

His hands were everywhere, invading, lingering, moving on. She felt the drawstrings of her petticoats loosen, the knotted ends that held the shawl come undone. They were experienced hands, knowing far better than she what they sought and where to seek it. Her body arched involuntarily in protest and surprise.

Joshua Stark laughed in his throat. His lips moved on hers: "Yes, little girl, wake up."

The floor disappeared from under her feet. The rope springs of the bed creaked beneath her weight and his.

"No, no, no," she heard herself repeating over and over—sobs of helplessness at first; then gasps of pleading against a new, unlooked-for pain; and finally, whimpers of resignation in cadence with the insistent rhythm of reality.

Chapter V

Bethany opened her eyes slowly to the glare of morning sunlight. She stared up at the low ceiling, marking the shallow gouge of a chisel on one of the hand-hewn beams.

Recollection of where she was and of every detail of the past night was as immediate as the throb of pain that lanced through her head from temple to temple. She closed her eyes again and turned her cheek into the pillow with a little moan. Her stomach gave a small, queasy lurch that cautioned her to use care in any further movements. No doubt this was only the beginning of the punishment Providence would visit on her that she might understand the full magnitude of her shame.

The scrape of chair legs on the floor jerked her shoulders and knees together in an involuntary knot. She pressed her hands to her mouth, afraid for a dreadful moment that she was going to lose the contents of her stomach right there on the pillow.

"Sorry. That damned chair! What's wrong? Are you sick?" Joshua, completely clothed from boots to high, starched stock and knotted scarf, was looking down at her.

She nodded mutely, swallowing and swallowing again to conquer the spasm. To be ill now in front of him, after everything else, somehow that would be the crowning indignity.

He handed her the basin from the washstand. "Hang your head over this."

Bethany obeyed, but with clenched teeth. Her will won out and the nausea receded slowly for the time being. She lay back on the pillow, pulling the bedclothes up close under her chin. The effort broke a film of perspiration onto her skin. Every muscle in her body ached besides feeling as limp as string.

She closed her eyes in resignation to the inevitable, but she reopened them at once in response to a chuckle from Joshua.

How she hated him. The thought lent sharpness to her frayed voice. "I hope—I am—contagious."

"I doubt it's anything that dramatic." His grin was without compunction. "You aren't the sort to die off in the manner of Clarissa Harlow. Your constitution strikes me as a measure too substantial for it."

She was astonished that he should know of Clarissa Harlow. *Clarissa* was one of the novels she and Rachel had read together, this one with the approval of Rachel's aunt, who had been told it was an edifying narrative. It concerned a girl who had defended her honor against her abductor's advances at all costs until, having resorted at last to wickedly drugging her, he had his way; whereupon Clarissa, virtuously declining his repentance, his offers of marriage, and his family's proposals to make restitution, went into a gentle decline and pitifully died, much to the grief of her formerly hardhearted relations. Rachel had wept at the story's tragic conclusion, but Bethany had been of the opinion that Clarissa's delicate sensibilities would have been no less admirable for an equal portion of common sense plus, perhaps, a hearty dose of calomel. Remembering, she felt her own pulse strengthened by a revival of anger.

"You are quite right. I have no intention of dying to quicken your conscience. Nor for any other reason you can take credit for."

His chuckle was infuriating. "I admire your wisdom. Particularly as it's highly unlikely that your malady stems from anything more serious than the effects of drinking more whiskey than you could handle last night."

Bethany's eyelids sank beneath the open taunt of his grin. She had to concentrate again on quelling the restless ground swell in her stomach.

Last night after she had lost the battle to him, she had been unable to stop sobbing. Joshua had produced a flask from his saddlebags and urged her to gulp down staggering draughts of its contents. He began to drink some, too, passing the bottle back to her each time, and each time it was in her hands she drank more willingly, broadening the wedge of indifference the whiskey created between her and reality.

It was true: she had been greedy. But she had also paid for that greed. She had lay back at last, quieted and hazily

relaxed by the liquor, but its effect on Joshua had been only to rekindle his ardor. He had taken her then, the second time, finding her a far easier and more manageable prey than the first.

For an hour or more after that, she had lain awake, torn between an agonizing need to use the chamber pot and a determination not to stir until she was positive he was asleep. When finally she had no choice but to slip out of bed, there was no break in the soft, even rhythm of his breathing, and none when, shivering from the chill of the unheated room, she crept back under the blanket. She was grateful for the hollow of warmth beside him and nestled into it.

He stretched an arm across her, drawing the curve of her back close to his chest. She did not resist, partly from fear of bringing him fully awake and partly because it was not an uncomfortable position in which to fall asleep. But then his hands began to stray over her nakedness, aimlessly at first—cupping her breasts, stroking the length of her thigh—but they soon became more purposeful, teasing her nipples, probing the secret recesses no locking of her knees or pushing of her own hands could keep from him. The struggle was short, and as always, the victory was his.

Even then she had not tasted the worst humiliation he could inflict. That had come this morning, in the early graying of darkness at the brink of dawn. . . . But, no, that memory was too shameful. She could not bear to recall it in detail yet. She burrowed her face away from him into the pillow, and flinched as the ache in her temples shifted like a load of coarse sand.

"I gather I may tell our landlady not to expect you for breakfast?" he asked.

The landlady! How was she going to face the landlady? The question jarred Bethany beyond her immediate misery into the wider anguish of realizing how her place in the world was forever altered.

Joshua was fitting the key in the door, preparing to take his leave. "Cheer up," he said, misinterpreting the stifled groan she pressed into the pillow. "By this hour tomorrow you'll be restored as good as new."

"Will I? Your word as a gentleman, I suppose." Bitterness burned her throat. She eased herself higher on the pillow to

glare at him over the edge of the bedclothes she was at pains to keep tucked close about her bare shoulders. "And how do you propose to manage this? By marrying me, perhaps?"

His hand paused on the doorknob. "No, I do not propose to marry you. I've had enough of wedded bliss to last me a lifetime, thank you."

"You already have a wife?" That he should be a married man somehow made her disgrace the deeper.

"I did have, once. A number of years ago when I was still very young in the ways of the world and foolishly sentimental about the tenderness and purity of womanhood."

"She's dead?"

"Yes." He released the doorknob and, very deliberately, swung around to face her. "She died quite suddenly. In another man's arms. Of a pistol ball through the head."

"You . . . ?" she whispered, her own troubles forgotten in this new shock.

His smile was a knife edge without humor. "Let's say merely that it was my pistol that fired the shot. Which accounts in part for why I find life among the savages in the wilderness more appealing than the refinements of civilization."

Bethany's heart hung suspended between two beats. She lay pinned beneath eyes that were for the moment the cold blue of steel. More than ever he resembled a pirate—ruthless, arrogant, totally without conscience. He might have killed her, too, had it suited him, but that would have been too great a kindness. It pleased him better to work her destruction by leaving her alive, despoiled and ruined, an object of shame for the rest of her days.

Her first reaction to noting that he was completely dressed had been relief: it signified that he had no intention of molesting her further. But now, seeing him standing in the center of the cramped room, every inch of him save for the dark shadow on his unshaven cheeks as outwardly respectable and well ordered as a deacon preparing for Sunday service, resentment began to boil through the skim of fear he had laid on her. Where were the powers of God and His justice that such a man could ride off unscathed while she was left so wretched in body and soul because of his unbridled wickedness?

"If I were a man—or if I even had a pistol—I'd shoot you."

"You probably would. And feel yourself perfectly justified, no doubt." A glimmer of amusement lifted his scowl. "With never a word of thanks for the favor I've done you, I suppose."

"Favor!" Bethany tried to laugh, but all she could produce was a croak that rippled the ache in her head to a dozen intensified ridges.

"Of relieving you of the ignorance our society so fondly calls innocence. You're trained in every art there is to enflame a man. You learn how to arrange a curl, tie a ribbon, and wear a gown in the most provocative way, how to smile and pout and flutter your lashes and widen your eyes prettily, and when to cling, when to retreat, and how, in general, to entice just about anything you want from a man. But your precious innocence is preserved by your never being taught anything, scarcely ever being so much as whispered to, about what that man is going to want of you. You'll be a good deal wiser the next time you set out to make a fool of a man."

Bethany closed her mind to the admission that anything he said might contain truth. He was the devil speaking, distorting everything to his own purpose. "A God-fearing man . . ."

"Yes, go on," he said when a flutter of distress in her stomach prompted her to pause. "A God-fearing man like the friend you were hoping to join yesterday? You don't honestly believe you'd have spent a much different night in his company than you did in mine."

Her silent battle to subdue her interior was dampening her skin again. "If it pleases you to think it." She had no energy to waste on denial, and what he believed or disbelieved was no longer of consequence to her anyhow. All she cared for from him was the sight of his back departing through that door, nevermore to return.

Instead, he took a step that brought him to the side of the bed. "It should please you to think so, bent as you are on being sanctioned by the Almighty. What better sanction can there be for the bedding of a man and woman together than the enormous care and detail the Creator put into designing them for exactly that purpose? Have you ever looked at your body? Really looked at it and seen how great a proportion of it is intended for passion and pleasure ahead of anything else?"

Bethany shut her eyes and averted her face. "I'm not a pagan."

"You're not a sexless little cipher, either," he said. "Look at yourself for once. Look!"

Bethany made a grab at the bedclothes as he twitched them off her, but they were jerked from her clutching fingers and flung in a tumble across the foot of the bed, leaving her naked to the all-revealing daylight. Instantly she rolled onto her stomach, hugging the pillow to her. Knees drawn up and shoulders tensed, she hunched herself against the expected rough pull of his hands attempting to turn her over.

He did not try to turn her. When he did touch her, it was to brush her tangled hair away from her shoulder and to trace a finger along one of the welts left by the birch rod. She had forgotten the marks would still be there.

"Who did this?" he asked quietly.

"My father." She pressed her face harder into the pillow. "He thinks what he pleases, too."

"A worthy, God-fearing man," Joshua observed in that same quiet voice. His finger continued down the pattern of stripes to her buttocks. "He must have had you strip to cut into you like this."

Bethany did not answer. In fact, her father had seized her gown where it was already torn by Francis's calculated pawings and had ripped it from her shoulders. It and the flimsy chemise beneath had been hanging from her waist in tatters when he had ordered her to bend over, her hands clamped on a chair back, while he administered the beating.

"And savored every righteous moment of it, or I miss my guess," Joshua went on. "I'll wager he couldn't wait to hustle that voluptuous redhead of his off to bed afterward and ride her like a five-race winner."

Bethany uttered a stifled, "Oh!" of mingled shock and censure. She pulled away from him, fumbling without success to recapture the sheet and cover herself.

The mockery returned to his laugh. "Don't tell me you imagined that the virtuous Phillips Herbert never ventured beyond a chaste kiss on the cheek on the other side of his bedroom door. Or were you given to understand in your innocence that a man of his age marries a seductive beauty

twenty years younger for the sake of her distinguished conversation?"

In all honesty, Bethany's imagination had never strayed to a serious consideration of what might go on behind her father and Christina's closed bedroom door. Her mind had conjured up vague pictures of intimacies being shared by Christiana and Francis—naïve intimacies that fell far short of the real mark, she now realized. But to think of her father, so austere and dignified, engaged in anything like what she had experienced this past night—and with Christiana . . . Yes, and more appalling, before Christiana, if this was how children were begotten, then with Bethany's own mother.

She stabbed an elbow toward Joshua along with a backward kick of one foot. "Go away, why can't you, and leave me alone!"

She scuttled crabwise from him to where she could catch hold of the sheet and drag it up. He tossed the blanket over her as well.

"All right. Breakfast does call more loudly than any other appetite at the moment."

He went out, chuckling at the swiftness with which she burrowed deeper under the covers. She lay listening to his footsteps fade along the passage, then to the fluting of a robin outside the window, to the creaking of a pump somewhere in the yard below, to the lowing of a not-too-distant cow, to a burst of male guffaws. At the center of everything was the ache in her head. All else receded in importance beside the need to lie absolutely still. Abruptly, urgently, that was the one thing she could not do.

She had just time to tumble out of bed and draw the chamber pot into the open. Her stomach refused to accept restraint an instant longer. It cast up its contents in a burning rush while she knelt, head bent over the pot.

She went on kneeling there on the bare floor for a few minutes more until she was fairly sure it was safe to risk sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling the blanket around her again. Gradually she grew aware that not only had the turbulence in her stomach subsided, but a large portion of her headache had evaporated, too. She began to feel that the morning might prove almost bearable—provided she didn't let herself dwell much on any one thought.

The temptation was strong to lie down once more, swathed in the bedclothes, and sleep until her strength returned, but there was something that cried out to be done first, as soon as she could possibly manage it. Shakily she got to her feet and poured water from the pitcher on the washstand into the basin. She wanted to wash herself all over, to scrub clean every portion of her that had come into contact with any portion of him.

The water was cold, but she welcomed the chilly shock to her skin. It was an added assurance that she belonged to herself once more. She smoothed her hands over the familiar contours of her body—the firm, upward swell of her breasts, the inward curve of her waist, the flat plane of her belly and the golden fleece below it, the graceful rounding of slender hips into slim, straight thighs, the full sweep of calves tapering to narrow ankles: as familiar as yesterday yet subtly different and new. Curious how, by contrast, a man was all hard flatness of chest and belly and flank. And humiliating that his knowledge of her body and its capacity to respond should have been so much greater than her own.

Bethany set to rubbing her arms and shoulders with the towel. Her breasts were contracted to rigid nubs at the tips by the chill of the water. They were acutely tender, almost painful, under her touch, but the pain shimmered into eddies of recollected sensation of his fingers brushing her nipples. Against her will, she was remembering how she had wakened to this sensation at the edge of dawn that morning.

Wrapped in drowsiness, she had lain passive pretending sleep, thinking at first to discourage further overtures, but more and more as the moments went on, savoring an ever-heightening pleasure. Little tremors of excitement coursed through her.

His lips moved over her throat and down to replace one of the massaging hands. The freed hand slipped downward, caressing, stroking, finding at last a place to resume its massaging.

She knew she was whimpering. She was clinging to him and whimpering, and she wanted him. That was the shame that could not be washed off. She had wanted him with a fullness of desire that was a terrible and exquisite ache. When he came into her this time, it was without force. He was part

of her. His mouth against hers was murmuring, "Yes, yes, yes . . ." until she had given it back to him in a final half gasp; half cry from the very center of her being: "Yes!"

Of all the reasons she had for hating him, that shameful episode would forever head the list. Until then, she at least had had the consolation that he had taken her by force and violently against her will. Then he had robbed her of even that shred of pride. What galled her spirit was not only that it had happened, but that he knew it had and would carry the memory with him.

She caught up her chemise, now quite dry, and pulled it on. She stepped into her petticoats and secured them at her waist with a knot in the drawstring that would not be so easily undone another time. A brown linen dress, white silk stockings, and yellow kid slippers finished the job of restoring a small sense of respectability.

She stooped carefully and retrieved her hairbrush from where it had fallen the night before. Her stomach was still too unsteady to risk any sudden bending or abrupt movement of any sort. Sitting on the chair and working slowly, she brushed her hair into passable order and managed to pin it into a loose coil at the nape of her neck. That was as much as she could do to repair the ravages of the night.

She lay down on the tumbled bed again, as weary as though she had been climbing a mountain, and lapped the corner of the blanket over her. Within minutes, she was asleep.

A rap at the door roused her. "Mrs. Stark, it's the landlady."

Bethany flinched at the name. She sat up, patting a quick hand to her hair and straightening her skirt. "Yes?"

Before she could get to her feet and open the door, it swung in to admit the rounded, graying woman who had been so solicitous of her the previous night. "My gracious, here you are up and dressed," she said, waving an arm over which hung Bethany's scarlet riding habit. "Mr. Stark thought you'd be abed most of the day. You were worn out with the travel and weather and all yesterday, must be."

"I'm feeling much better," Bethany said, and was relieved to discover it was true. Her knees were not quite as steady yet as she would like to have them, and there was a lightness in

her head where the ache had been, but the pain was gone and so was her nausea.

"Well, you just take all the rest you need. You don't look too strong to me even yet." A gentle push of the landlady's hand steered Bethany back toward the chair. "I told him I wouldn't wake you if you were sleeping, but that I'd look in around noon and spread your riding clothes out for you, although it's going to be a while more before you'll be wanting to put them on."

"Noon! It can't be that late, can it?" Bethany turned to the square, high window, which was most certainly shedding a much mellowed brightness into the room than when she had last noted it.

"Some past, as a matter of fact." The landlady hung the riding habit on a row of pegs beside the door—pegs Bethany had missed discovering in the confusion of her arrival and unpacking. "But don't fret yourself about the hour. You've lost no time resting that you'd not have lost anyway. You won't be traveling on until Mr. Stark gets a new shoe for the one his horse threw somewhere in the muck and mire yesterday, and the blacksmith's doing such a brisk business today what with one thing and another, he won't be getting to that job for a couple of hours."

"Oh, no. You mean he hasn't—" Bethany pressed a hand to her mouth to keep from blurting out too much. She had supposed, though, that Joshua Stark had walked out of her life forever when he'd walked out of the room this morning. That was how she had wanted it to be. She wanted never to have to set eyes on him again unless he was dangling from the end of a very high rope.

But, of course, there were his saddlebags on the floor where he had left them. He would not go off without those. If she had had her wits more about her this morning, she would have seen them.

"He's a good man, the smith is, good workman and honest," the landlady assured her, assuming it was a doubt on that score which had prompted Bethany's dismay. "He'll have that horse shod and well shod before the day is done, Mrs. Stark. And it's an ill wind that blows no good, as they say, for now you can rest up today with a clear conscience,

and be the fresher and stronger for it when you do reach your poor friend."

Mrs. Stark. That wretched name. But it was nothing to the name the woman would call her if she knew the truth. Bethany linked her fingers together in her lap and discarded the idea of telling the woman everything and demanding the law on Joshua Stark. Instinct warned her that whatever Joshua's punishment would be, she would count it merciful and brief beside the stigma that would be hers to bear for the rest of her life.

"Why don't you come along downstairs with me and have some dinner?" the woman said. "A bite of food will perk you up no end, I'll warrant. You could use more flesh on those bones anyway, and while you're gone, I'll have Betsy tidy up and freshen things here in case you'll be spending another night."

Bethany could have forgone dinner or even the mention of it without the faintest pang, except that a new determination was already beginning to take form at the back of her mind. The hint that the alternative must be a second night here solidified it, and she allowed herself to be escorted from the room and down the stairs by a plump hand under her elbow. She wanted to be sure of her strength in the next few hours.

A number of teamsters and travelers, all of them men, were seated at the plank table in the common room, most of them giving their undivided attention to generous portions of a boiled dinner. One swift glance told Bethany that Joshua Stark was not among them. She did not trouble to scan the group again.

The landlady seated her at the far end of the table, somewhat separated from the close elbowing of the others, and served her a portion as ample as any of the men's. It was a test of Bethany's will power to put a fork to that challenging array of beef, potatoes, cabbage, and carrots in no way designed for a delicate digestion, but she forced herself to do it, and discovered on the first mouthful that neither her digestion nor her appetite was as delicate as she had feared.

"Eat all you can, and eat it slow," her self-appointed mother counseled. "It's good, wholesome fare that will see you through a lot."

Bethany would have preferred not to be made so conspicu-

ous, but she was grateful for the woman's presence hovering in the background while she ate. She was acutely aware that the tone and volume of the men's conversations had been reduced to low rumbles and only a scattering of exchanges since she had entered the room, and that probably none of these men would leave the inn unable to describe her appearance in some detail. One of them, a burly man with bushy red hair, directed such a prolonged stare at her that she was uncomfortably conscious of it without looking up.

"Expect you'll be getting fitted up with spectacles pretty soon, Hank Waldo," the landlady said, returning from tending a kettle on a crane in the huge fireplace. "Appears you must suffer a deal from eyestrain."

The red-haired man's muttered retort was lost in the tumble of chuckles from the other diners. He made a show of mopping up the gravy on his plate with a piece of bread, but when he rose to leave, he found an excuse to walk past Bethany's end of the table. She kept her eyes down and pretended not to notice, but the hairs on the back of her neck prickled from a fear that he might be intending to speak to her. Impudence of this sort would have been foreign to her experience on any occasion; today more than ever she felt herself to be on insecure ground.

He strolled on by her without commenting, however, and after an idle circuit of the room, wandered out the door. Bethany finished her dinner swiftly, cramming down mouthfuls more than she wanted against the hours ahead, and retreated up the stairs. More than ever she was convinced of what she must do next and of the haste with which she must do it.

It was evident at a glance that Betsy, whoever she was, had indeed been in the room during Bethany's absence. The bed had been freshened and neatly made, most of the garments on the chair back and the foot of the bed hung up on pegs and the rest folded in tidy piles on the bed, and the window opened to let in a warm, sweet breeze. Her riding hat sat on the shelf above the washstand, its broken plume of yesterday replaced by a jaunty bronze-edge feather that must have cost some neighborhood rooster dearly in terms of his pride.

It was quick work to gather her belongings and pack them once more into her improvised sack. She considered changing

her dress for her riding habit, but decided against it. Too much time would be lost in the process, and she had none to waste. Also, the habit might raise awkward questions. The brown dress, a straw bonnet on her head, and her mother's shawl tossed over her shoulders would do far better to preserve the fiction that she was simply going out for a stroll to while away her waiting and to clear the vapors from her head. It was natural enough that she should find her way to the stables to see how Nellie was doing.

The bundle was the problem. She would have liked to carry it along with her to the stables, but that would attract too much attention too soon. It would have to stay in the room until the hostler had Nellie saddled and ready to ride. Then Bethany could run upstairs to fetch it and have him, at the last minute, cinch it into place. At that point, regardless of what questions were asked or eyebrows raised, she could mount up and ride off. Let them corner Mr. Stark for explanations when he returned.

The image of Joshua Stark's discomfiture trying to account for the behavior of his devoted little wife brought a smile to her lips as she closed the door and hurried downstairs. While he was floundering and fuming, she and Nellie would be laying up miles between them and him. She would not pass another night in the vicinity even if to avoid it she had to sleep in a haystack or steal into some farmer's barn. The one person in the world she was sure would stand by her in her present circumstances was Rachel, and Rachel she would reach if she had to travel clear to Fort Dearborn by herself.

There was no one in the common room when she ventured a cautious look inside, but she heard voices and the rumble of a wagon getting under way out front. A narrow passage behind the stairs promised more seclusion, and she slipped into it. A door at the end ushered her into the garden at the rear of the inn, and directly beyond were the stables. She heard a commotion among the chickens around the side of the inn and guessed that the landlady was pursuing a candidate for the evening pot, but here, too, there was no one in sight for the moment.

On the threshold of the stable, she hesitated, thinking she heard voices in the depths of the interior, but when she listened more closely, there was nothing but the munching of

hay and the intermittent stamp of a hoof or swish of a tail to be heard. And after all, she reminded herself, why should she care? She had every right to be there to see about her horse.

Only five of the dozen or more stalls were occupied. She located Nellie in the next to the last at the farthest end. The little mare whickered in recognition and thrust her head forward in search of a treat.

"Nice Nellie, that's my girl," Bethany crooned to her, patting the sleek neck. "My pretty girl—"

"Miss Herbert?"

The voice, abrupt and confident, spun her halfway around before she could stop herself.

"By God, it *is* you, isn't it! You are that Herbert girl." It was the red-haired man, emerging from an empty box stall just beyond Nellie's. "I told you she was, didn't I?" he demanded over his shoulder of another man, less burly but taller. "I'd have staked my team on it—this is Phillips Herbert's chit."

Bethany's heart was pounding so hard she thought it must be trembling the fringe of her shawl, but she drew herself up as straight as any of the best of Boston's matrons might if confronted by the same rudeness. "You will pardon me, sir, but if you are addressing me, you are very much mistaken." She lifted her chin to gaze past him at his companion. "Are you the hostler here?"

"I help out some," the taller man began.

His red-haired friend interrupted: "Don't put on them holier-than-thou airs with me, Mistress Wide Eyes. I heard how you got yourself caught a few days back having a tumble on the floor with one of your Pa's houseguests. I keep company some with Susanna that works in your kitchen when I'm in Boston, and I've seen you a dozen times in and around that big house on Beacon Hill."

Bethany's stony disregard did not waver. No power on earth could have nerved her to face him. "Please," she said to the hostler in a voice that was thin but steady, "if you would saddle my horse—"

"Now, you don't want to go rushing off when we just met," the red-haired man interrupted. "I've always kind of wanted to get better acquainted, and seems like this ought to

be the time—you all alone and such a distance from home, and me and Ned here feeling awful lonesome, too."

Bethany dodged the brawny arm that attempted to snake around her waist. "I'm not all alone. If you don't stop annoying me, I'll scream for help."

The man called Ned lost his grin. He shifted the jug in his left hand to his right and to his left hand again, uneasily. "She's right, Hank. She's not alone. I told you I seen her come in last night, her and this big, rangy fellow."

"Yeah, you told me, and I told you if there was a wedding at the Herberts', it was a mighty quick one, because none was planned up to yesterday morning, I know for a fact." Bethany's left hand was caught and twisted upward in a grip that was carelessly cruel. "Appears it was a wedding without a ring, too."

Bethany tried to wrench loose, but the men were now flanking her, one on each side, and so close that she was pinned between them.

"I calculate in that case you'd as soon be nice to us as have your doings blabbed all around," Ned suggested, his grin restored.

She jabbed an elbow at each of them and opened her mouth, filling her lungs for a scream. Hank's fist landed below her ribs, doubling her over and shrinking the scream to a gasp. A hand smelling strongly of the stable clamped itself over her mouth. Her arms were locked in a tangle of other arms propelling her backward into the empty box stall. At the same time another hand was fumbling at the low neck of her gown, seeking to pull it off her shoulder. She kicked wildly as she heard the delicate fabric tear.

"Just calm yourself," one of the men said. She was in too much of a panic to distinguish who. "What we got in mind ain't going to take all that much of your precious time."

She tried to kick, but the combined weight and strength of the two men was bearing her off balance and down. She lost her bonnet, and her shawl fell away. Straw crackled under her and jabbed sharp spears into her unprotected shoulders and neck.

"You stand off, now," Hank growled at Ned. "This first ride's mine."

Reluctantly, the taller man released her arms and sat back on his haunches.

Hank's face, sweaty and grinning, came down to hers, so close she could feel the heat of it. Her freed hands flew up to lock themselves in his tangled red hair and yank. The man let out a howl and brought a hamlike hand against her jaw in a savage cuff.

The blow sent her senses spinning away. She was only dimly aware of him wrenching at the basque of her dress, baring shoulders and breasts, or that he was astride of her and his weight was hurtful. More keenly, she felt the rasp of his bristled chin digging into her tender flesh, and she cried out.

As her eyes focused once more, she saw a movement beyond his heaving shoulders, beyond the crouching form of Ned beside him flicking his tongue in and out as he watched her. There was a third man in the stable.

Joshua Stark was moving in light and fast, so quickly that Ned, wholly absorbed by the scene in front of him, failed to see him until it was too late. With a belated sqwawk of surprise, he tried to swing around on his heels and leap up, but Joshua's long right leg was already sweeping upward to intercept him. The toe of his boot met Ned's chin, snapping his jaws together with an audible click, flinging him over backward to sprawl on the hard-packed runway.

Hank's face was buried between Bethany's breasts. He was so lustily occupied in tormenting her, rubbing his whiskers painfully to and fro across her skin and chortling, "*You are a choice-made filly,*" that the small commotion beside him appeared not to touch even the edge of his consciousness. He winced and swore when Joshua's fingers bit into his shoulder.

"Goddammit, Neddie," he snarled, swinging up his head, "I told you, wait your turn."

Joshua's other hand seized him by his broad leather belt in back. He was dragged bodily away from Bethany, half lifted to his feet, and hurled into the runway.

Bethany rolled over and sprang up, dragging the tatters of her dress over her bosom. Her one thought was to run, to escape, but she could not. The runway was blocked.

Joshua's attention was briefly on her, then flicked to Ned, who was stumbling to his feet, groaning and holding his head.

"Look out!" Bethany cried.

Hank had gathered himself in a ripple of motion like a snake. He was unfolding upward from a crouch, the wink of a wicked steel blade in his fist.

Joshua assessed the danger at a glance. Unbelievably, Bethany saw a smile flicker over the grim line of his mouth. He was stepping aside, his left arm sweeping out from his body in a blur of swiftness, as the red-haired man lunged.

The knife passed between his body and elbow. His arm clamped Hank's, pinioning the teamster momentarily. At the same time, Joshua's right hand slammed into the man's neck. The hard edge of his lower palm caught Hank at the joining of neck and shoulder.

Bethany's nerves jerked at the *thunk* of the blow. Hank wilted. Joshua let go of him, and the teamster's body slumped to the floor. The knife slid from his nerveless fingers.

Joshua shot a glance at the still-moaning Ned, then bent to pick up the knife. As he straightened, he winced and swore softly. He drove the knife into a stall post with a vicious thrust, and gave it a quick, sideward push that snapped it in two.

Bethany shrank from him as he turned toward her. He was as terrible as the other two, capable of anything. She leaned, trembling, against the wall, too shaken and appalled even to cry.

Joshua retrieved her fallen shawl from the floor and draped it around her shoulders. Reaching behind her, he scooped up her bonnet, which by a miracle had not been trampled, and set it on her head. Not until then did she see the bright stain soaking into his shirt just inside the left side of his coat.

"You're hurt?"

"A scratch. It's nothing," he said gruffly, and drew her out of the stall and around the unconscious Hank.

They halted in front of Ned, who was seated on an overturned bucket the better to nurse his swelling jaw. Joshua's voice was as cold and hard as the knife blade he had broken:

"If you're wise, you'll keep your mouth shut about all this, and you'll tell your friend there to do the same. Tell him, too, that if either of you causes me or this young lady the least trouble again, I'll finish today's work with an ounce of lead apiece."

Joshua did not wait for an acknowledgment of his advice. A firm hand under Bethany's elbow, he moved her on out of the stable and in through the rear door of the inn.

The landlord was in the doorway of the common room. He started forward when he saw them. "The young lady not feeling well? The wife's gone across the road, but I'll send the girl for her—"

"No, don't trouble," Joshua said. "A little rest is all she needs." His tone made it clear that no outside assistance was wanted.

Bethany hugged her shawl more closely, conscious of the telltale wisps of straw clinging to it and grateful for the shielding arm that ushered her up the stairs. Once inside the room they had shared, however, the door securely shut, his air of attentive concern vanished. He withdrew his supporting arm with an abruptness that left her swaying in the center of the floor, and flung himself around to glare down at her with eyes that blazed like blue fire under the blackness of his scowl.

"Now maybe you can tell me what in God's name you thought you were up to out there by yourself? And what's the meaning of this?" He jabbed the toe of his boot toward her neatly packed bundle lying beside the door.

Bethany sank onto the edge of the bed. Her knees would hold her no longer. "I wanted my horse saddled. That's all. He said—the tall one . . ." She drew a quavering breath. "He said he worked for the hostler."

"And then he jumped you?"

The skepticism in his voice stung worse than the raw scratches on her bosom. He still thought she was no better than he had made her, and that the fault was all hers.

She clenched her fists, tightening the protective folds of her shawl. "The other man, the teamster, recognized me from Boston. It wasn't hard for them to guess you're not my husband, and your example was all the invitation they needed."

If the words struck any vestige of conscience, she saw no sign of it except for a blackening of his scowl. He turned his back to her, wrestling somewhat awkwardly out of his coat and favoring his left arm a trifle. "This beloved friend you were so avid to join last night, you expected to find him

waiting in company with a parson and a church full of wedding guests?"

"My friend is already married. Her husband is a lieutenant in the United States Army, and they are on their way to Fort Dearborn." She spaced the syllables as if she were giving a lesson to a very dull child.

"Really?" Joshua was easing out of his bloodied shirt. He tossed it to the floor in a wrinkled heap. "Am I to understand, therefore, that your—ah—demonstrations of affection toward the British major were merely a passing fancy? A moment's madness?"

Bethany watched woodenly as he dampened a towel in the washbasin and began to sponge the ooze of blood away from a long, red crease across his ribs under his left arm.

"Major Ainsley is my stepmother's lover."

She felt a thin triumph at seeing the towel halt its dabbings. "You didn't happen on that 'demonstration of affection' in the library by accident; what you saw and what you thought were exactly what they intended you to see and think. Their plan was to use my inheritance to settle his debts and keep him near her, and when they discovered I'd overheard them, they staged a nice little scandal so I'd have no choice but to marry him. And so my father wouldn't credit a word I said against them."

He weighed her with a contemplative stare before the towel resumed its operation.

"I could almost be persuaded that's the truth, having had to listen to the major's expostulations and avowals of your innocence and his culpability for half an hour after that pretty tableau in the library. I thought at the time that he was a stupidly inept liar, that he did protest too much and too loud, but it could well be that he's a remarkably clever manipulator of the truth instead." His scowl returned. "As for you, it's no strain of the imagination to believe you might pack up your worldly possessions in a sack and go riding off headlong into the big world without a word of explanation for anyone or a thought of the consequences. That's what you were up to just now, wasn't it?"

Bethany straightened her spine. "I owe you no explanations."

"No, of course not. Me nor anyone else. And you're much

too proud to complain about the consequences. I flatter myself, though, that you were pleased enough to have me appear on the scene just now. But if I hadn't come up here and guessed from your pack what you were about, I might not have gone looking for you."

He was a violent man. She had seen proof of that only minutes ago, and she had heard from his own lips that he had committed murder. It was foolhardy to anger him, but the knowledge of all that only made her tongue more reckless.

"You can't stop me from leaving. I'm not your prisoner. I'm going on to Albany, no matter what. I'm going to find my friends, and you can't stop me."

"I haven't the least desire to stop you. But I do doubt whether you'll ever get there by yourself or in what condition. Our acquaintances in the stable aren't the only pair of their sort you're likely to encounter between here and there." He rinsed the towel in the basin, wrung it out, and draped it across the end of the washstand. "As it happens, I have business in Albany, too. I may as well undertake to keep you out of trouble on the road if you're willing to trust yourself to my protection for the rest of the way."

"Your protection!" She pressed her hands to her mouth to stifle a laugh that was fraying toward hysteria. "Your pleasure is what you mean."

"Granted." His grin, spontaneous and impudent, was always a surprise. "A maidenhead once gone is gone forever; there's no point in behaving as if it could be restored. I confess I enjoyed last night's entertainment. And who knows? With practice, you may learn to appreciate it yourself."

"Never!" Her vehemence sent her bonnet tumbling from the back of her head.

"As you will. The choice is yours." He lifted the basin and emptied the faintly pink-tinged water out the open window. "I expect to be leaving here within the hour, whatever your decision. My thought was merely that you might prefer the security of a known 'evil' to the hazards yet to be discovered."

Bethany shuddered, her memory reviving the sour-sweat stink of Hank, his solid weight crushing down on her, the gleeful distortion of his glistening face as he deliberately sought to hurt her. This hard-muscled, black-browed man in

front of her, she realized, had used her far less cruelly than he might have. She could not seem to look away from the thin tracing of the knife blade on his ribs. The scornful retort she had intended dwindled to a small, half-swallowed, "No."

"In any event, you're going to have to do something about that gown: change it, mend it, something." He set the basin on the washstand and in one stride was standing over her. "Let's see what damage that swine did."

She had thought she would contract into one unending, jagged scream if ever a man touched her again, but his hands were too swift to fend off, drawing aside the shawl and pushing down the torn remnants of her bodice with a deftness that bordered on the impersonal. He cursed beneath his breath, gazing at the raw tracks Hank's whiskers had left on her skin.

Bethany raised her own hands to cover as much as she could. She wanted to ask why he should care if they had hurt her, but the question came out: "Why did you help me?"

He shrugged, and laughed. "Trust a female to puzzle over a thing like that. I don't know. Maybe I was just spoiling for a good fight. After I've spent a certain amount of time among the niceties of civilization, all the hypocrisies and posings set my teeth on edge to where I'm ready to chew fence rails."

Then his eyes caught hers and held them, his hands cupping her bared shoulders. "What about you? Why did you warn me he had a knife?"

Bethany met him stare for compelling blue stare until she could endure no more and bent her head. "I don't know."

The pressure against her shoulders began tilting her backward onto the bed. "No," she said again, but it was a wavering sound, trapped by a flutter of breath in her throat.

His mouth was on hers, claiming it, before she could fully marshal her resistance. She hated him, loathed him, despised him, she told herself, thrusting against him with futile fists. But through the breach in her defenses she was shamefully conscious of a quickening of anticipation as deliberate, demanding, sure, his lips moved on hers, murmuring, "Yes . . ."

II. FORT DEARBORN

Chapter VI

"Yellow, I think. Yes, yes, yes. Something cheery and bright for the curtains." Rachel Page stood on the woven Indian mat in the center of the small, log-walled room, cocking her head judiciously at the square window opposite her. "And the same for your bed, don't you think?" She spun around to survey the bed set up in the farther corner of this kitchen-parlor-bedroom. "If we get started on them today, we can have them all sewed and ready to hang by the time Lyle gets the canopy frame made and put up. Then you'll have a bit of privacy."

Bethany put down the big spoon she was using to stir the contents of the iron pot over the fire. "Yellow would be pretty. Whatever you think."

She tried to summon enthusiasm into her voice, but privacy was a treasure lost so far back in the past that she had forgotten what it was like. If Rachel supposed any was provided by the partition that divided these quarters at Fort Dearborn into two rooms for the Lieutenant Pages, it was because she had not heard how every murmur and rustle in the bedroom seeped through the cracks between the planks as if the wall were thin as muslin.

Certainly there had been no privacy during the interminable days they had traveled by leaky, storm-rocked ship to get here. Three other women had shared the ladies' cabin with Bethany and Rachel most of the way, and the five of them had passed the journey either huddled together under open umbrellas and parasols against the water that constantly splashed down on them from the deck above, or else diving individually for chamber pots or any other vessel that would serve when the motion of the cabin floor became too much for their stomachs.

As for privacy! It had taken Bethany more than a week to reach Albany and the Pages, jogging at a maddeningly slow

pace up and down side roads and into byways that seemed to lead nowhere but to the next inn, the next humiliating bed. Bethany gave the spoon another swift turn in the pot, sending a spatter of liquid over the side to hiss into the fire. She intended to forget that week. It was behind her, dead and buried. She would not let herself remember.

"What I think is that we need an excursion, we need to go shopping." Rachel was already settling her bonnet on her dark head. "We've been so busy unpacking and getting things in order here, we're going to turn into drudges if we don't fly off and have some fun. We'll start by getting the goods for the curtains, and—yes—let's pick out material for a new dress for you. I'm tired of feeling guilty every time I compare the stacks of things in my trunks to the little you were able to carry away."

It was true that Bethany's wardrobe could stand some refurbishing—even in this wilderness settlement of traders, retired soldiers, and half-breed families scattered up the river from the fort. There were dances and parties and gatherings at which something other than a travel-stained riding habit, an obviously mended brown dress, or a silk gown much the worse for water spots would be appropriate.

Yet Bethany could not summon up the pleasure she once had known at the thought of a new dress. Her taste for decking herself out in eye-catching ribbons and frills had waned sharply in the past weeks.

"I can make do with that purple gown you gave me," she said.

"That will do for a scrub dress, nothing more. Those rust streaks where the trunk leaked on it aren't ever going to come out. Besides, the color is all wrong for you, and by the time you've done the lengthening and taking in it needs in order to fit you, you'll might as well have put together a new one." Rachel marched to the fireplace, Bethany's bonnet in her hand. "Here, now, put this on. It won't hurt to look, whether we buy anything or not. And if there's nothing we like at the U.S. factory here in the fort, maybe we can find someone to take us across the river to Mr. Kinzie's trading post."

Bethany accepted the bonnet, smiling in spite of herself. Her spirits were not so low that she was dead to the lure of exploring, something they'd had little chance to do in the

dozen days they had been here. The novelty of being quartered in a log house that was part of a compound of log buildings fenced around by a log palisade set in the midst of open prairie was nearly as fresh as the day they had arrived.

A gate in the north wall of the palisade opened onto the grassy bank of the Chicago River. There was also a subterranean gate, Lyle said, with a well from which the garrison could draw water in case of siege. The south gate, flanked on either side by a blockhouse, gave onto a broad area called the esplanade, where the army wagons, the enlisted men's patches of vegetable gardens, and the stables housing cattle, sheep, and horses were found.

This afternoon, as the girls crossed the hard-packed parade ground, both gates stood wide open to any who chose to enter or depart. As they went out the north gate, Bethany cocked her head to the bright notes of a meadow lark's song spilling down from the overhead blue like the June sunshine. Her blood stirred with a quickened regret over the loss of Nellie, whom Lyle had helped her sell for a tidy sum before they had embarked on the boat for their journey through the Great Lakes. What a relief it would be to gallop off across the open prairie beyond the gates and ride and ride and ride until every shred of tension was wearied out of her. A truly jolting, jarring ride might even be the solution to her most immediate worry if the old wives' tales she and Rachel and their friends had passed along in whispers were to be trusted.

"Can you believe that only eight weeks ago we were feeding the pigeons on Boston Common?" Rachel asked, treading so closely on the heels of Bethany's thoughts that it was almost as if she had read them.

"More like nine weeks," Bethany said.

She could have been more precise than that, right down to the number of days, for of late she had been keeping a careful and increasingly anxious reckoning of every twenty-four hours that slipped by without bringing her a trace of the womanly flow that had been almost as punctual as the phases of the moon since the year she was thirteen. Last month she had been in such a turmoil of misery, anticipation, excitement, and despair from the relentless twists her life was taking that she had scarcely noted the absence of one more detail of her former routine. But now it seemed that she must face having

missed a second month in a row, and a terror was growing in her faster than the baby she feared. What would she do if she were with child? What would become of her?

Rachel would stand by her, she was sure, and think only a little the worse of Bethany for it. That is, if there were just Rachel and Rachel's sweet nature to consider. However, there was also Lyle.

"Go right ahead if it pleases you: denounce me from the house-tops; set the hounds of justice yapping at my heels," Joshua had advised her, grinning that maddening grin of his when she had threatened to do exactly that. "I daresay I'll survive, but my guess is that your friends will be a great deal fonder of you if you choose to preserve a discreet silence on the subject. It's been my observation that, after the burst of sympathy and righteous rage on her behalf dies down, ladies who have been wronged in the manner you claim to have been—and under circumstances that leave their innocence far less open to question than yours, my sweet little runaway—end up being more shunned than pitied. A truly virtuous maiden would die rather than yield. You should know that. You will discover that precepts like that carry the weight of holy writ in the minds of the majority of the population; it spares them the effort of thinking."

At the time, Bethany had regarded the speech as a bid to save his own skin, as well as an attempt to provoke her temper, one of his favorite pastimes. Only an unexpected wash of gratitude when he actually did search out the Pages in Albany and deliver her into their care prevented her from making her accusations against him with her first breath. In another ten minutes she had found herself confirming the blandly vague explanation of how and why they were there that Joshua gave in reply to a quizzing from Lyle that stopped barely short of insult in its thinly veiled skepticism. Lyle, the correct young officer, had been no match for Joshua, the master scoundrel, who had cut off the questioning at last by drawing himself up stiffly and inquiring in a tone edged in steel, "Am I to understand, sir, that you are uneasy as to the character of my intentions in offering the protection of a family friend to Miss Herbert when she was in distress?"

Lyle apologized at once, seconded by Rachel, who, misinterpreting the shame burning in Bethany's face, had been

ready to confer sainthood on the man who had come so nobly to the aid of her friend. And Bethany, smarting from the implications that underlay both the apology and the questions, had been forced to yield one more victory to Joshua Stark: her lips had been sealed.

What she had begun to grasp then, and what she had seen demonstrated often since, was that Lieutenant Lyle Page governed his life by two basic principles—honor and duty. Duty would require that he make provisions of some sort for his wife's friend should he learn of her misadventure, but honor would forbid him to accept such an unfortunate creature as a fit companion for his wife. Bethany had not dared to unburden herself of the whole truth even privately to Rachel, for Rachel confided everything to Lyle. The Pages had heard an edited version of Christiana's attempt to recoup Francis Ainsley's fortune by marrying Bethany to him, but they knew nothing more. Yet.

"Look there!" Rachel squeezed Bethany's arm to draw her attention to a buxom young Indian woman entering the open door of the factory, the company store that was their destination. "See how she's dressed? Do you suppose she's one of the—well, you know—a 'wife' of one of the enlisted men, the way Lyle was saying?"

The young woman was a vivid patch of color in a blue cotton gown topped by a black-fringed red shawl and a red straw bonnet decked in ribbons of the same color. Bethany lowered her eyes to conquer a desire to gaze at the squaw too intently for courtesy.

It was just last evening that Lyle had reluctantly and haltingly told Rachel and Bethany of the status of some of the Indian women they would be encountering in and around the fort. They were short-term wives, bought from their families by one or another soldier to be a marriage partner for a year or two, or until the soldier be stationed elsewhere. It was a deplorable practice, Lyle had conceded, but apparently an accepted custom among men isolated on the frontier. He had wanted to forewarn his women lest they be embarrassed by stumbling onto the situation one day unawares. When Bethany asked what became of the women when the arrangement ended, and Rachel inquired about the children, if any, he had

merely shrugged. It hadn't occurred to him to ask, much less to wonder.

"Men!" Bethany sent a pebble skipping from under her slipper. "What do they see when they look in a mirror, do you suppose?"

"I don't see how they can want to do it. White men take such dark wives, I mean." Rachel gave a little shudder. "It's different for the women, of course. A white husband instead of a red one—that has to be an improvement. And then the presents, the beads and blankets and things . . . And besides, I doubt they know any better to begin with."

"Than to pick a white rooster to crow over her instead of a red one? Maybe there's not that much to choose between in the long run."

"Bethany!" But Rachel's shocked giggle faded midway to become a quick handclasp of sympathy. "All men aren't as calculating as that horrid Major Ainsley or as misguided as your father. The world is full of generous, decent men. You'll see."

A short, sharp cramp in the depths of Bethany's interior pinched off any desire to carry the argument further. She and Rachel both glanced again at the Indian girl as they followed her through the doorway and passed on behind her to the plank shelves that lined the rear wall. The Indian girl briefly lifted dark eyes that were neither hostile nor friendly, then returned to her study of an array of bright-colored ribbons. The girl's own ribbons were soiled, her gown not very recently laundered, and her figure beneath her shawl was rounding outward with a promise that could not be misread.

Bethany forced her attention to the bolts of broadcloth and calico on the shelves, swallowing down a sense of kinship that burned the back of her throat like gall.

The shelves offered a surprising variety of dry goods from which to choose. Rachel was in her element. She unfolded lengths of fabric, fingered them, pondered, invited Bethany's comments, and asked the graying corporal in charge to carry various bolts to the door where she could examine them in the light. She settled at last on a sunny yellow cotton for her curtains.

"And this sprigged calico would be perfect for you for a summer dress." She held up a corner of pink material sprin-

kled with tiny blue and white flowers. "Let me try it against your cheek. Yes, it sets off your complexion to perfection."

"If you'll forgive me my boldness," said a soft male voice behind them, "I'd say it was the other way round; that perfect complexion sets off anything you want to put near it."

Bethany did not have to turn her head to know who it was. She was strongly tempted not to turn.

"Ensign Kimbrough," Rachel greeted him. With just a touch of mischief, she added, "We seem to meet you wherever we go."

Bethany did look up at him then, wondering if he would have the grace to show some embarrassment, but the wide curve of his smile and the clear tan of his skin did not alter a jot. In the small world bounded by the walls of the fort, it was more of a feat not to meet the same people frequently than to cross their paths often, but in recent days, to Rachel's amusement and Bethany's increasing irritation, Ensign Virgil Kimbrough appeared to be overdoing it. He was the post's junior officer, and the only one of the four not married, therefore highly eligible in his own estimation as well as in everyone else's.

"Mrs. Page, Miss Herbert." He bowed to them, a young man of stocky frame, heavy shouldered, square jawed, and as fair of hair as Bethany herself. "On my honor, I stopped in here to see about a new razor without ever a thought to who might be here ahead of me. But I can't deny that you ladies possess a power of magnetism. Had I known you would be here, I'd have been on hand a lot sooner."

Bethany resisted an urge to put her fingertips to her temple where an ache was beginning. The ensign's eyes were a color she no longer admired, although their mild blue set in a ring of sandy lashes was a far cry from the blue intensity beneath black brows that sometimes mocked her still in her dreams. What would happen to the ensign's engaging smile if he knew that so much as a glimmer of interest in a man's glance made her stomach want to empty itself and her fingers curl into claws.

She smoothed the pink calico where it lay on the rough board counter. "Since we have official approval, I will take enough of this for a dress."

The less debate there was about the selection, the less time they would need to linger here receiving unwanted pleasantries.

Nothing would do, however, once their purchases were made but that Ensign Kimbrough must carry their bundles home for them. "Never mind, Brady." He waved aside the corporal's gesture toward a box of razors on a side shelf. "I'll come back later."

The ache in Bethany's temple was taking hold in earnest. It jumped against the front of her skull like a blow from a fist when she stepped outside into the glare of the sunshine. For a giddy second, she thought she might even be going to faint, but fear of what additional solicitude that might evoke from this beaming young man caused Bethany to set her teeth into her inner lip for steadiness.

The door of their quarters was a dark oblong in the log walls. She and Rachel marked it in the same instant, and their dismay was identical. "It's open! The door's open."

"I shut it when we left. I know I did. I was positive," Bethany said.

"I was positive, too," Rachel mourned. "You don't suppose . . . Oh, I hope—"

"I'll go see." Bethany darted ahead, her headache receding at the chance to separate herself from the pressure to be politely sociable. She left Rachel to explain the cause of their consternation if she liked: that dogs straying from the Potawatomi village downstream had a habit of wandering indoors uninvited and twice had deposited malodorous messes on Rachel's one rug.

A brown dog did scuttle away as Bethany reached the door sill. She stamped her foot and called, "Shoo!" Then she gasped the doorjamb for support and stared into the room.

Five pairs of black eyes stared calmly back at her from the faces of five Indian men. They sat in the center of the floor, blankets draped around them and guns lying at their sides.

"My gracious!" Rachel gasped behind her. "What do they want?"

By her tone, Bethany guessed that Rachel, too, was recalling the tales they had heard of the Indian uprising led by Tecumseh that had brought about the bloody battle of Tippecanoe only seven months earlier. They had learned already

that as time and distance were reckoned on the frontier, that event still seemed uncomfortably close.

"It's all right, ladies. Don't be afraid. Just walk on in," Ensign Kimbrough said in a voice that carried both assurance and authority.

Bethany scanned the five faces again. Like those of the girl's in the factory, they held no menace, but were stolidly unsmiling. She had seen plenty of tame Indians in Boston. They dressed like other men and worked at the same sort of jobs as other men, driving teams, sailing fishing boats, carting firewood. She had also seen a good many beaded and blanketed Indians since departing Albany, but never until now had it struck her that the basic difference between wild Indian and tame was that the men like these in front of her had not yet accepted the fact that the white man must be master.

She wasn't frightened, she told herself. Merely startled. She and Rachel were not accustomed to guests who arrived armed and camped in the parlor while no one was home. With a lift of her chin, she stepped into the room and proceeded to remove her bonnet and hang it on its peg.

Ensign Kimbrough laid the bundle of calico on the table and spoke to the visitors. "These are the quarters of Lieutenant Page. Do you have business with him?"

"We hear of this new young chief," replied the Indian at the center of the five. The quality of his English surprised Bethany. "We hear he has ways like the Potawatomi, that he keeps two women. We come to see this young chief and his women."

Rachel swallowed a small exclamation and shrank closer to Bethany, but Bethany felt the sting of salt in her own wounds. Head high, voice as chill as the most proper of affronted Boston matrons, she said, "Lieutenant Page does not keep two women like the Potawatomi. He keeps one wife, Mrs. Page." She nodded at Rachel without shifting her glare from the seated five. "I am Mrs. Page's friend, her guest. I am not the woman of Lieutenant Page or anybody else."

She stopped, a little aghast at herself as she became aware of Rachel's restraining hand on her sleeve. What if the Indians took offense in their turn? What would they do?

There was a questioning mutter from one of them. The man in the middle replied in a rumble of unintelligible syllables,

evidently translating her speech. Grunts acknowledged that they all understood. The spokesman added another comment in his own language. The responding grunts softened to chuckles, and grins broke the somber mold of the faces.

"What did he say?" Bethany demanded, seeing a similar grin flicker across Ensign Kimbrough's face.

The ensign rubbed his hand across his mouth and the grin was gone. "They have strange ideas. They . . . Well, it's complimentary to you but"—he coughed—"somewhat less to Lieutenant Page, I'm afraid."

At once he was under fire from Rachel's stare as well as Bethany's. He reddened, mumbled that his command of Potawatomi was sketchy, and after clearing his throat, finished: "He said something to the effect that the young chief must in fact be very old."

Bethany drew back, casting as withering a look at him as she could produce. It hardly mattered what bawdy remarks the Indians wanted to pass among themselves. The gulf of race and culture that divided them from her gaped so wide in her estimation that she might as properly be affected by the chirping of prairie dogs. But there was no excuse for Ensign Virgil Kimbrough to be smirking at the remark. He would not have done so, she suspected, had Lyle been there.

Rachel's hand, still on Bethany's arm, was trembling, but outwardly her dignity was as cool as Bethany's. "If you wish to meet my husband, I think you will have to come another day. He is in charge of a detail of soldiers who have gone upriver to cut wood today, and it will be late before he gets home."

The Indian at the left end of the semicircle, a slack-lipped man whose nose pointed slightly off center as though it had once been broken, spoke a growl of sounds.

"He's asking for bread," Ensign Kimbrough translated. "If you have some bread on hand to feed them, they'll probably be satisfied and leave."

Rachel shook her head, her eyes wide. "There's only corn bread from last night. That's all."

"That will serve excellently," Ensign Kimbrough said.

Rachel brought the bread from the metal safe on the shelf and cut generous chunks. Bethany spread them somewhat less generously with the wild plum jelly that had been a gift from

Mrs. Heald, the commandant's wife, and handed them out to the five Indians. It didn't surprise her that Crooked Nose, as she had dubbed him, reached for the first piece, nor that the spokesman declined to accept any until the other four were supplied.

A well-knit man in his early middle years, he conveyed a sense of discipline and competence that was impressive even though she had to fight not to wrinkle her nose at the oddly sweet smell of smoke and rancid oil and sweat among other less identifiable elements that hung like an aura about him and his friends. She did not have to invent a name for him. When the last of the corn bread had vanished and the men rose to their feet, he pointed to each in turn and pronounced their names. The names were composed of such outlandish syllables that they went from Bethany's aching head as quickly as they entered, but when he spoke his own, pointing to his half-bared chest, he paused and added in English, "Little Hawk."

Without further ceremony, the five then filed out of the open door and stalked off in the direction of the north gate.

Ensign Kimbrough walked to the door and quietly closed it. Bethany sank down on the bench beside the fireplace. Her knees no longer wanted to support her.

Rachel dropped down beside her. "My gracious!" She uttered a shaky laugh and began to fumble at the ribbons tied under her chin. "I forgot to take my bonnet off. I hope they couldn't guess how scared I was. I've never entertained savages before."

"They meant no harm. I could tell that. By and large, the Indians hereabouts are friendly to us. I wouldn't have let you ladies come inside had I thought there was the least danger or that I could fail to protect you adequately." The young man's smile was tolerant, almost fatherly. "You needn't have had a moment's unease."

He obviously expected praise and gratitude, when it was Rachel and Bethany who had done all the doing, Bethany reflected. She turned her shoulder to him to hug Rachel. "You were splendid. Lyle will be so proud of you when he hears."

"Of us," Rachel said, a glow of achievement replacing the

pallor that had been hers throughout the visitation. "And he'll be so grateful to you, Ensign Kimbrough. As we are."

The ensign's fair head dipped in a choppy bow that somehow put Bethany in mind of a puppy's wagging tail. "I'm grateful that I was here to be of use to you. Grateful, too, that I've been called on to face down Indians on various occasions in the past. They have cause to know that I'm not afraid of them."

Why must he end every remark gazing eagerly at her, Bethany wondered. Did he actually believe that five armed Indians had been cowed into good behavior by the presence of one downy-cheeked youth whose self-esteem was the biggest thing about him?

"I suppose you've led many a foray against the Indians," she said.

The untempered tartness of her voice earned her a lifted eyebrow from Rachel and redoubled eagerness from Ensign Kimbrough.

"On the contrary, our major purpose in being here is to keep the bands friendly to us. It's true that some of them undoubtedly took part in the Tippecanoe battle on behalf of the British. They're lured up to Canada every year by the presents the British heap on them to buy their allegiance, but we've been fairly successful in maintaining good relations here except for that one incident last April." He moved his shoulders in what might have been a token of modesty. "Of course, then I did lead a rescue expedition."

"Rescue?" Rachel echoed. "Where? What happened?"

"A dozen Winnebagoes, renegades, came down from the north to take some scalps. They killed a Mr. White and a Frenchman before they heard the cannon at the fort fire an alarm signal and got scared away. Everyone came scrambling into the fort for safety except one woman and her family, Mrs. Burns. She was stranded at home in bed with a newborn baby, so we took a scow up the river in the dark and brought them back."

That had taken courage, Bethany conceded, and gallantry. If he was proud of himself, he had a right to be. But why wouldn't he follow the example of his Indian friends and leave?

His story had carried him across the room to the hearth.

There he stood, right in front of her, inviting her comment and admiration, when it was all she could do, the closer he got, to force herself not to draw away. A shiver caught her unawares.

"Miss Herbert, I haven't frightened you? I've been saying everything wrong. They're gone, those marauders. They were in the neighborhood just a short while, and they did nothing more than some minor mischief once they knew the fort was alerted. I swear it." Distress dropped him to one knee, the better to see into her lowered face. "Please, what I was trying to assure you was that you should feel as safe here as you did in Massachusetts."

"Bethany, what is it?" Rachel sounded as if she were calling from an enormous distance.

As safe as she had been in Massachusetts! Bethany's breath snagged on the edge of a laugh. "Nothing," she made herself say. "I—I'm . . ."

And to her horror, and that of Virgil Kimbrough and of Rachel, she burst into tears.

Through the welter of their exclamations and questions, she heard only one thing clearly: Ensign Kimbrough's anguished suggestion that he fetch the post surgeon.

"No. Please, no!" Bethany gasped, struggling to control her sobs. The last thing that must happen would be for a doctor to examine her and perhaps confirm her fears. "I'm sorry. Please, I'll be all right. In a minute . . ."

"Come and lie down in the bedroom. You've been under a terrible strain these past weeks," Rachel said, once more hitting on the right answer for the wrong reason.

An arm around Bethany's shoulders, she raised her from the bench and drew her into the tiny room that was Rachel and Lyle's. Bethany let herself be pressed down onto the bed. She listened gratefully to the sound of the door closing, leaving her in privacy, to the murmur of Rachel's and Virgil Kimbrough's voices in the other room, and to the closing of the outer door, signaling that he was finally gone.

She lay on her side, a slow trickle of tears continuing to dampen her sleeve where her cheek was pillowed on her arm. But a sense of peace stole like a soothing lotion over the raw ends of her nerves. Eventually that door would have to open and she would have to face the world again, but for the time

being it was enough to be able to lie still, unobserved, and feel her tension draining away.

A sudden, grinding cramp in her belly jerked her from the brink of drowsing. She sat up, digging the heels of her hands against the pain to ease it until gradually she became conscious of something else. Incredulity brought her to her feet. She reached beneath her skirt and tugged at the fastenings of her petticoat. The garment slipped to the floor.

"Bethany?" Rachel knocked gently at the door. "Are you feeling any better? I've made some tea."

"Much better. I'll be right out."

The petticoat was a white bundle in Bethany's arms—white except for a bright red stain of fresh blood. Menstrual blood. It was the most beautiful stain she had ever seen. She took a second or two longer to mold her elation into a decently contrite expression before she opened the door.

"You've probably already guessed what was ailing me," she said. "But I'll be all right now."

Chapter VII

Bethany reined her horse at the top of a dune. She squinted against the sparkle of sun on the blue water rippling away below her to merge with the curve of the sky in the distance.

This had become one of her favorite spots, these sandy dunes overlooking Lake Michigan. Rachel said the scene made her homesick for Boston because it was so different, but to Bethany that was part of its fascination. Such an expanse of open water unfettered by crisscross patterns of masts and spars, the miles of white beach empty of human foot prints, the sweeping view of lake shore and prairie never failed to quicken her pulse a little.

"Whoa, steady," she told her horse, who was shifting his feet by way of reminding her that he was not fond of standing still for long. L'Ange was the name bestowed on the horse by the Frenchman who had raised him, but Lunge was what the soldiers had dubbed him since he had become a piece of army property, although in truth he was not all that difficult to manage.

Compared to Nellie and her temperamental ways, he was nearly as good as his original name, but Bethany had acquired him as a mount through no small amount of argument and persuasion. The moment Virgil Kimbrough had understood that she was fond of riding, he had arranged for her and Rachel to have access to the horses in the garrison stable whenever they chose. But his selection for Bethany had been an ambling old wagon horse that couldn't have moved faster than a walk if its tail was on fire.

She lifted her face, damp from the heat of the August afternoon, to the breeze flowing off the lake. There was an extra fillip of pleasure in being here today because for once she was able to enjoy the view in solitude. Finding herself alone anywhere was a circumstance all too rare in a world that contained Virgil Kimbrough. She sometimes wondered if

he ever had any military duties to perform. He was forever bobbing up at her elbow to hand her into a canoe, to steady her into her saddle or out of it, to advise of the gentlest path or the location of the biggest patch of wild flowers when she and Rachel set out for a stroll beyond the gates. And always, he was prepared and willing to accompany her as guide or guardian or companion or any other role of escort the excursion warranted. It was seldom necessary to invite him. The problem was to invent excuses that would discourage him.

"He acts like I'm made of china, and the thinnest china at that, likely to chip or crack or smash to pieces if even a door is slammed too hard," she had complained to Rachel and Lyle after one particularly exasperating evening at a dance in one of the farmhouses upriver. The ensign had filled every minute by fanning, feeding, and otherwise waiting on her to the point where she had felt almost suffocated. "I know it's my fault for behaving like such a goose the day those Indians were here, but you would think after a while he could see I'm capable of walking across a room without being assisted at every step."

"What can you expect? The poor lad's been badly smitten," Lyle had said with the complacency of one who had been there once himself and emerged safely on the other side. "You and Rachel must be a heady change from the French girls and half-breeds and trappers' daughters that have been his fare out here. And you're unattached. The draught's too strong for the boy."

"Of course it is." Rachel's nod had mimicked his complacency. "He's going to declare himself to you soon, Bethany. I'm positive he is. And he's not such a bad match, either: so handsome and polite and comes from a good family in Kentucky. Think how it might mend matters between you and your father if you could write and tell him you were respectably married to as fine a man as that."

She said it laughingly, and laughingly was how Bethany received it. But the thought, once spoken, would not go away. Bethany knew, for she had spent the handful of weeks since that conversation trying to make it do just that. Yesterday evening when she and Virgil had strolled out beyond the gates after supper, she had been hard put to chatter into silence his efforts to speak seriously as she had done on any

number of previous occasions. Intuition warned her that the game was nearly played out; next time she might not succeed at all, or if she did, he might finally judge the campaign hopeless and never return to it again.

So here she was this afternoon, sitting a restive horse atop a sand dune in hopes the wind would blow an answer into her head that none of the powers of her mind seemed able to crystallize.

Respectable. That was the key word. A wedding band on her finger and a respectable husband at her side would go far toward salving her father's outraged honor and mending his opinion of hers. It would go farther still toward restoring the fullness of her own sense of worth, so badly damaged on the road to Albany.

Then why not marry Virgil Kimbrough? She had learned to find his company tolerable, even pleasing, as this summer had worn on. If his solicitude for her bordered on suffocation now and again, nevertheless the sense of being lifted to a pedestal and there revered as a being too precious to be exposed to the commonplaces of this earth had worked a remarkable healing on her shattered self-image.

Lunge swung his head and pricked his ears. Bethany soothed him absently, following the line of his gaze to where a canoe was gliding southward on the lake, hugging the shoreline. Indians returning from a fishing expedition probably, or else a party of off-duty soldiers doing the same. They were too far off for her to be sure. She smiled at the thought of Virgil's consternation should he be one of the group and recognize her up here alone—without him to protect her from sea gulls and butterflies and similar terrors of the open.

But Virgil was attending a hastily called council in Captain Heald's office this afternoon. Lyle, too, and the fort's third junior officer, Lieutenant Helm. And so she had seized her opportunity to slip away unattended.

Mrs. Virgil Kimbrough . . . No need to debate whether she loved him or not, for she didn't. She had no intention of ever loving any man. That was a force that could blind a person as it had done her in the matter of Francis Ainsley's charms; and cripple as it had her father under Christiana's spell; and ultimately imprison as it was already beginning to do to Rachel as she evermore tailored her thoughts and wishes

to what would most please Lyle. Come to that, Virgil's love was overwhelming enough to suffice for two.

All the same, it wasn't impossible to picture herself at the center of a dozen domestic scenes that included Virgil somewhere in the shadowy background. Where her imagination balked was at the door of the bedroom. To lie beside Virgil Kimbrough in a bed, to have him lay claim to her most intimate places . . . A clammy fog engulfed that vision whenever she tried to picture it.

And yet of late, her body had become disquietingly alert to the creak of bed ropes, the muted moans and murmurs, the ragged breathing that were all too audible through the thin partition that separated her bed from Lyle and Rachel's room. Only by touching herself where touching was forbidden had she found a way to relieve the tension.

Lunge flung up his head and snorted. His flattened ears told her he must have caught the scent of the people in the canoe, and they were Indian. Like many another horse she had seen on this frontier, Lunge shied at the smell of Indians.

Bethany turned him from the lake and started down the dune. When they reached the grass of the prairie, she gave him his head, letting him take her away from the dune and her bitter musings.

The day was too hot, though, to run him long, and she brought him down to a more sedate pace after half a mile or so. Also, she was in no hurry to return to the fort.

Of course, she didn't have to marry if she chose not to. She could return to Boston when she was of age and take possession of her inheritance from her grandfather. With that, she could live in independent comfort as a spinster for the rest of her life.

But she did not want to return to Boston. Not to live there. She liked the simpler, freer life that was hers out here. As for the role of spinster . . . She reflected on the small nods and secret half-smiles that passed from time to time between Rachel and Margaret Helm, Lieutenant Helm's seventeen-year-old bride, when they and Bethany sat sewing together or sharing a cup of tea; little smiles and nods of understanding that were unspoken references to the private knowledge of married women and that excluded Bethany, not cruelly but on the assumption that she had no way to comprehend. She had

no desire to spend her life as an outsider, chafed by the need to pretend an ignorance that wasn't hers.

So the question was settled. She kicked Lunge into a canter, suddenly wanting to seek out Virgil and make the decision final.

As she skirted the edge of a stand of oaks, a red-clad figure scrambled to its feet beneath one of the trees and darted across her path. Lunge snorted and tried to dance sidewise, but Bethany managed to bring his head down and his pace to a walk before they were abreast of the round-eyed black girl staring up from under the brim of an oversized bonnet.

"Sally, for the love of mercy!" Bethany said as severely as she could, for there was always something about this youngster who belonged to Captain Heald and his wife that made her want to laugh. "What are you doing here? Trying to get yourself killed? Or to kill me?"

"Oh, Miss Bethany!" Sally had both hands pressed to her heart. "I must have fallen asleep, I guess. I opened my eyes and thought sure that horse was going to gallop right over me. I just picked up and run."

"Next time run behind the tree, not in front of the horse," Bethany told her.

"Next time I won't be here. Not by myself this far from the fort." Sally wiped a sleeve across her damp forehead and wriggled from bonnet to shoe sole with an eloquent shudder. "That Bluejay or whatever he call himself, he make me so jumpy saying pretty soon we all going to be hoeing in the Indians' cornfield, that I think I see him coming to get me anywhere I go."

Bethany hid her amusement behind a show of quieting Lunge, who was pricking his ears toward the trees and flaring his nostrils as if he expected that a dozen more Sallys were lurking there, preparing to leap out at him. She had heard of some such remark about cornfields a visiting Potawatomi had spoken through an interpreter one day when Margaret Helm and Mrs. Heald were playing shuttlecock in the captain's quarters. Captain Heald and the other officers had dismissed the comment as nothing more than a flare of jealousy because the white women had time for games while the Indian women spent their days in hard labor. As Bethany recalled, the threat had been leveled against "the white chiefs' women," and no

one had construed it to mean the man had designs on a skinny, black fourteen-year-old. No one but Sally, apparently.

"I doubt you need worry much about that," Bethany said. "That was a good while ago. Weeks. And nothing's happened."

Sally shook her head. "It was just yesterday, Miss Bethany. That Bluejay, he said that to me yesterday." She rolled wide eyes up at Bethany. "If you're going back to the fort, maybe I could walk alongside or just a bit behind?"

Bethany sent a glance into the shadows among the trees and another across the greens and tans of the empty prairie. Her confidence in the men's estimate of the Indians' temper remained unshaken, but she discovered she would not be sorry to have company the rest of the way home.

"If you can get up behind me, you can ride back."

"There's a big stump over there," Sally said, pointing. "I can climb up from that. Just let me fetch my basket."

In no time she was firmly settled on Lunge's rump, a basket full of dirty roots and dark green leaves and stems clutched on her lap and an arm wound tightly around Bethany's waist.

"I do thank you, Miss Bethany," she said. "Mrs. Heald will be thanking you, too, 'cause what I come looking for was sumac root to boil up for her to soothe her bad belly. I got some mint here, too, to brew up for the captain case he needs it after the council."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because they was yelling their heads off last I heard them," Sally said without much concern. "When Captain Heald gets mad enough to yell, he's going to be sick after, I know."

What would be generating such heat in a routine council of officers, Bethany wondered. And what part was Virgil playing in it? He had given her more than one intimation that his respect for Captain Heald's leadership was less than it might be. But yelling at each other? She decided to wait until she could question Virgil himself rather than depend further on Sally's highly colored explanations.

She prodded Lunge to a slightly quicker walk and said, to change the subject, "I didn't know you were versed in simples and herbs. Who taught you?"

"My mam. I just know some from watching her, but she can name and put to use near anything that grows."

Bethany was surprised into an over-the-shoulder look at Sally's dilapidated red bonnet, undoubtedly a piece of Mrs. Herald's onetime finery. She hadn't expected such a softened tone or such warm pride from this grasshopper of a youngster.

"Your mam? Your mother? Where is she?"

Bethany wished she'd left the question unsaid as soon as it was out. She wasn't that ignorant about the separations that could be brought about by the buying and selling of human beings. It was only that having seen Sally about the fort, fetching and carrying for the Healds or capering to the tune of a soldier's fiddle or balancing on a wagon tongue to watch a fight between Indian dogs, she had seemed as much like an odd, little pet animal as anything. Bethany had given no more thought to her in terms of having a mother somewhere and family ties than she would have a squirrel.

The stupidity of her question was confirmed by the sudden lack of animation in the child's voice: "She's still back home in Virginia, I guess. I don't know, except she's worth too much for them to let her go. But I been gone now a long while."

What did one say in reply to that? Bethany flicked a hovering fly away from Lunge's ear with her crop, and resolved that in the future she would be kinder to Sally.

A recollection stirred in the depths of her memory: men at her father's dinner table discussing the prohibition of importing Negro slaves into the United States. She couldn't have been more than eight at the time, but she remembered distinctly one of the men saying, "It's a dirty trade at best. Who's to say we're not well out of it?" She could not recall who said it. She only wished she could be equally unsure that it was not her father.

Sally broke a long silence as they circled a group of grazing cows and neared the esplanade. "Look like supper time, the way everybody's stirring."

The esplanade did present a more wide-awake appearance than was usual at this hour of the afternoon. A cluster of soldiers were gesturing and talking in the shadow of one of the blockhouses. Another handful stood near the sheep pen, paying no heed to the sheep, who were bleating and milling

as if they had been disturbed. Still other men were pacing in twos and threes in various directions, without any apparent purpose but with more animation than the heat of the day warranted. Bethany could detect no sign of alarm, but the subtle pulsing of excitement in the air was unmistakable.

Before she could speculate further, Sergeant Jung, the stable sergeant, was bearing down on her, his pinched face wearing an even sourer expression than its normal pucker. She and Rachel sometimes giggled over the question of whether the sergeant's perpetual bad humor was the result of constant scolding from his wife, who outweighed him by fifty pounds, or if Mrs. Jung scolded out of frustration at being tied to so joyless a mate.

"What's happening?" Bethany asked him as Sally relaxed her hold and slid lightly to the ground without dislodging a leaf in her basket. "Is something going on?"

"You can ask the ensign that. I just about got skinned alive, thanks to you. Next time you don't set foot in a stirrup without I know first where you're headed and for how long."

"Indeed, Sergeant?" Bethany's brows lifted. "I wasn't aware that I was answerable to you for my actions."

She tossed the reins to him, ignored his perfunctory move to help her dismount, and swung herself to the ground as easily as Sally had but with a great deal more hauteur. Sergeant Jung muttered beneath his breath, and glowering at the toes of his boots, led Lunge away.

A hand descended on her arm. "Miss Herbert. Where have you been? You're all right?"

She was drawn around to face the distraught features of Virgil Kimbrough.

"Of course I'm all right. Why on earth shouldn't I be?" she said, the edge of her vexation still sharp, and tried without success to shrug free of him.

"Promise me you won't ride out like that again, never alone. Promise. My God, when I learned you'd gone off by yourself, nobody knew where, not even in which direction . . . My God." He shook her arm. "Promise me."

"Mr. Kimbrough! You're hurting me." The charge was not quite true. Even in his distress, he was at pains not to be overly rough, but his behavior was so unlike the almost

fawning respect he had always paid her that she was at a loss whether to attempt a retreat or to stand and do battle.

"Forgive me. Please, forgive me." He released her at once, only to secure her hand in his the next instant. "Walk with me a little way, will you? And listen to what I want to say?"

Too mystified to think of a refusal, she let him pilot her through the clutter of wagons, pens, and stables of the esplanade and on into the open beyond the black and dusty green patches of the garrison gardens. He was struggling to resolve something in his own mind she could see, but her patience was not equal to waiting indefinitely for the explanation.

"What is this all about?" she demanded at last. "Tell me. What have I done? Committed a crime of some kind or what?"

"You? You are the dearest thing on this earth to me. I'm sure you must know that, although I've hesitated to overwhelm you by saying it too soon." He halted to gaze down intently at her. "The only crime you could possibly commit would be to disregard how deep is my concern for your safety—provided you should grant me the right to be concerned."

Here it was, the proposal she had expected and had prepared herself to accept. She was conscious of the tremor in the hand that clasped hers, of the fair hair pasted in damp strands across the perspiring forehead, the mingling of confidence and pleading in the adoring pale eyes above her—and suddenly she was not as ready as she had supposed to be confined to a pedestal for the rest of her days.

"Mr. Kimbrough, you have me at a disadvantage, I'm afraid. I don't—I can't . . ."

"I'm being too precipitate, I know," he agreed. "Forgive me. Lord knows I meant to choose a more romantic spot than out in the blazing sun and in full view of half the garrison. And believe me I want to persuade you, not bully you, but now there may not be time. Everything is different now."

"Different how? What is different? Why can't someone tell me?" It was an excuse to pull away from him, to deflect the main thrust of his declaration.

Virgil Kimbrough's lips compressed. The set of his shoulders and the line of his jaw squared into the firmness of the

military man. "We are at war with Britain. An Indian runner and a white trader brought word from General Hull this morning. Hull and the Army of the Northwest are in possession of Detroit, but the British have overpowered and occupied our post at Mackinac."

"War?" Her half-step backward was uncalculated this time.

There had been war talk in Boston, but both the possibility and the consequences had seemed far more remote when discussed in her father's drawing room than they did here at a crude post on Lake Michigan. Mackinac: the island at the head of Lake Michigan that commanded the waterway to Detroit and to Lake Erie and to the East beyond.

"What does that mean for us?" She flung out her hand to include the fort as a whole—the animals, the soldiers, a pair of calico-shirted Indians loitering near the open gate.

"That's not certain yet. General Hull's orders are to withdraw from here to Fort Wayne if that's practical, but there are those of us who think we'd do far better to stick to our guns right here." A flush darkened his cheeks. He directed a scowl toward the fort, giving her an inkling of what the shouting in the council must have been about.

His gaze returned to her, and the anger vanished. "I'm foolish enough to hope it may mean something else to me as well, Miss Herbert. Your protection, your comfort and well-being, are more precious to me than I can express, most especially now. If you would do me the honor, grant me the right, the privilege to look after, to govern . . ."

He stopped and swallowed, seeming to search for more words. Bethany had a dismaying impression that he was about to go down on his knees in front of everybody, but he restricted himself to merely catching at her hand again.

"Miss Herbert, would you consent to marry me?"

Yes, Bethany prompted herself. Say yes. That was what she had intended to do, what she did intend to do. Her salvation lay in becoming Mrs. Kimbrough—quiet, decent, respectable, above reproach.

What she said was, "Give me a little time. A little time to settle my thinking . . ."

She felt almost ashamed of her hedging, he agreed so eagerly and so humbly. It crossed her mind as they retraced their path back toward the fort that she might soon be in the

position for which she had envied Christiana: wife of a man simple enough to be wound around her little finger. Curious that the prospect somehow lacked the sense of triumph one could have expected.

A tall, rangy man strolled out through the gates and paused to speak to the two Indians lounging outside. Bethany's heart checked itself between beats.

She must have made a small sound, a gasp or a cry, for Virgil said, "What is it? Are you feeling faint?"

"No, no." Her voice was remarkably steady, and the sound of it steadied the rest of her. "A pebble in my shoe, that's all. It's gone now." Then, casually, with a faint nod at the gate, "Who is that man over there?"

"That's the trader that came in this morning with Catfish—the runner who brought the word from General Hull. I don't recall his name offhand."

Bethany had no need of the name. The man was wearing a suit of buckskin belted with a broad red sash in the manner of the Frenchmen who worked for Mr. Kinzie's trading operation. But in rough dress and moccasins or frilled shirt and fine boots, every angle of that lean, bold figure shouted his identity to her.

Her instinct was to turn and run, to hide somewhere until the wilderness swallowed him up once more. But that was impossible with Virgil at her side, matching his pace to hers and smiling down at her fondly. Impossible, too, to suppose that she could pass in through the gates without being noticed, or that having taken notice, Joshua Stark would display either the discretion or the decency to let it go at that. Already those intensely blue eyes had found her. She could feel them making her skin tighten, although she was concentrating on a point well beyond him where a group of children were playing tag on the parade ground.

In three long, unhurried strides he put himself in front of her. "Miss Herbert, isn't it?" The old mockery was in his voice, challenging her to deny him. "What an unexpected pleasure."

"Mr. Stark," she said, and did not extend him her hand. "Yes, very unexpected."

"You two are acquainted?" Virgil asked.

"I had some business dealings with Miss Herbert's father

in Boston this spring, at which time Miss Herbert showed me a degree of hospitality for which I shall ever be in her debt." Joshua's smile was a suave taunt in his dark face. "I'm delighted to find you looking so well."

"I am exceedingly well, thank you," Bethany said. Suddenly she felt a deadening calm. "You will have met Ensign Kimbrough, I think. We are soon to be married."

To anyone who did not know Joshua Stark intimately—who had not had those pirate features burned painfully and bitterly into indelible memory—the stillness that shuttered his eyes and froze his smile for a split instant would have been too subtle a change to be marked. But Bethany marked it, and knew triumphantly that this once she had caught him off guard.

He recovered himself immediately. "My congratulations, Ensign. May I wish you both much happiness." His bow was fluid and gracious and the merest touch derisive, but Bethany did not care.

Her heart persisted in such a wild dance of gratification that she hardly heard Virgil Kimbrough's ecstatic, "Miss Herbert! Bethany!" as he drew her through the gate and into a secluded corner formed by the angle of a blockhouse and the palisade wall.

Neither did she really feel the eagerness of his mouth as he pressed it first to her fingers and then, gently, to her lips.

Chapter VIII

"It's madness, absolute madness! The man himself is mad!" Virgil Kimbrough brought his fist down on the table with a force that made the candle flame jump. "He disregards all commonsense advice from white man and Indian alike, issues orders to evacuate the post and set out on a forced march through hostile country! Then he just sits here day after day doing nothing more about it while word of his intentions gets passed along to every British-paid redskin band between here and Fort Wayne!"

Lieutenant Helm added a finger of brandy to his glass from the bottle Rachel had set on the table as soon as she and his wife and Bethany had finished clearing away the supper dishes. "There's something askew in the man's thinking somewhere. He acknowledges that his orders give him discretionary powers to retreat or to stay, and he admits we have stores, ammunition, supplies of all kinds enough to last us here for six months at least—time enough for General Hull to get reinforcements to us here, in all probability. Yet he's got it in his head that he'll be censured by the War Department if he doesn't turn over everything to the Indians and leave. And there's not a damn thing we can do to stop him."

He paused, brandy glass to his lips, and sent an apologetic glance toward the end of the room where the three young women sat, their heads bent above various items of sewing. "Your pardon, ladies."

Bethany did not look up from the broad white ruffle she was stitching to the bottom of Rachel's green-checked apron. She had heard so many bursts of profanity punctuating so many repetitions of these same arguments in the past few days that she wondered anyone could pretend to believe they still had the ability to shock.

Captain Heald was persuaded that his sojourn among the Potawatomi had won their unqualified friendship. He believed

that by dividing the fort's excess stores among them on his departure and by promising them additional gifts to be received once he reached Fort Wayne in safety, he could enlist his restless neighbors as a protective escort for the march. Those were his orders as he read them, and he was deaf to every effort his officers, some of the more responsible chiefs, traders in the area, and even his own enlisted men had put forth to convince him otherwise. The three junior officers were helpless to do anything but carry out orders in public—and to vent their frustration in private whenever they gathered together as they had this evening.

The anxious furrows across Lyle's brow were audible in his voice as he repeated for the hundredth time: "Even if we weren't adequately reinforced before the British could attack us from Mackinac, better to be taken by British than by savages."

Bethany heard Margaret Helm's small indrawn breath of assent and saw Rachel's hands falter briefly on the green riding skirt she was hemming for herself. Often as Bethany had heard the observation made by Lyle and by others, it seldom failed to drive a chill ripple down her spine as well. But tonight the presence of a fourth member of the impromptu war council had Bethany's nerves too acutely on edge for her to attend overmuch to what anyone else said or did.

She had racked her brain for a reason that could dissuade Rachel from inviting him to supper, but she had been defeated by her friend's tranquil assertion: "It's little enough to do for him after the kindness he showed you."

Joshua Stark, of course, had not hesitated to accept. He had entered into the evening's sociabilities with a suave courtesy and charm that betrayed no glimmer of an uneasy conscience. Had he shown even a momentary discomfort or reluctance, Bethany would have been less rigidly on guard. But a man who lacked the decency to care about anything was capable of anything.

She frowned at her needle, holding it up to rethread it in the light from the candle on the mantel shelf. Yet she was alert to Joshua's reaching for the brandy bottle, the trickle of liquor into his glass, his hand cupping the glass rim so he might inhale the fumes before sipping. His buckskin-clad presence somehow dwarfed the other three at the table in size

and age, although he was not as heavysset as Virgil and probably no more than two or three years older than Lyle.

"If nothing else, perhaps you can at least convince your captain of the wisdom of destroying his excess shot and powder before he turns his stores over to the Indians," he said. "No American trader I know of has made guns or ammunition available to them since the trouble on the Wabash last year." His glance went past Bethany to the fair head beside her. "I believe your father would bear me out on that, Mrs. Helm."

The girl nodded quickly. Her father was Mr. Kinzie, the trader, and she seldom spoke of him without a note of affectionate pride that Bethany could not imagine using in reference to her own father.

"Father was on his way to Detroit last fall. He was nearly there when he heard of Tippecanoe, and he turned right around and went back to Chicago to send orders to all his traders not to furnish ammunition to the Indians. Those that were already at their posts hid what they had, and those that hadn't already left for their winter quarters took none with them."

Under cover of the discussion this provoked at the table, Rachel murmured, "I think I would rather be shot than taken prisoner. Mrs. Jung, the sergeant's wife, says she'll die before she lets them take her."

"She'll kill herself, you mean? Do you think she actually would?" A thrill of horror tightened Bethany's scalp. "I don't think I could."

"I'm not sure I'd be that brave, either," Margaret admitted, snipping a thread from the shirt she was mending. "But if it was a choice between that and being tortured or burned alive—"

"Or dishonored," Rachel breathed. "I've heard a white woman's not safe from them even that way."

Bethany bent lower over the fine stitches she was making, hopeful that the shadows might conceal the hot rise of blood to her cheeks. In spite of herself, she stole a brief glance toward Joshua and was rewarded by the crook of a sardonic black eyebrow. It was scarcely possible that he could have heard the low exchange of feminine confidences beneath the louder

talk of the men—unless he had been deliberately listening. But she should have known that little ever escaped him.

"Before we alarm the ladies too much," Joshua said blandly, "I think it would be wise to remind them that some prisoners of the Indians have been treated very well. For example, there is Captain Welles, an acquaintance of mine, who is a chief among the Miamis today and highly respected among the whites. He was captured by the Indians when he was a boy. After he was finally returned to his family, he chose to go back to the Miamis to live."

"Captain Welles, yes!" Virgil beamed a false heartiness across the room to the trio of women sewing by the window. "He's a Kentuckian, family of the Honorable Nathaniel Pope. If I'm not mistaken, he's also a shirttail relative of Captain Heald. Who knows? He may be the one who could talk some sense into the old man's head."

Lieutenant Helm shook his head, wearily. "He's likely to be a hundred miles from here. You'd need to travel fast to get word to him in time." He broke the pensive silence by pushing his chair from the table and standing up. "Well, I'm on duty tonight. Margaret and I had better be on our way."

Rachel tumbled her riding skirt into the basket at her feet as Margaret Helm began to fold up the mended shirt. "It's a lovely evening. Lyle and I will walk you to your quarters if you like." Rachel gave Bethany a mischievous smile that became the essence of cordiality when she turned it on Joshua. "Perhaps you'll join us, Mr. Stark? I doubt Lieutenant Kimbrough will mind keeping Bethany company for a while in our absence."

It was such a transparent maneuver to give Bethany and Virgil some time alone together that Bethany was astonished to see Joshua bow a gracious assent without any attempt to discomfit her by upsetting the arrangement. The flicker of a grin as he took his leave told Bethany that her misgivings had not gone unmarked. That in itself, she supposed, was sufficient entertainment for his twisted sense of humor.

Virgil came to seat himself at her side as soon as the others had melted into the dusk beyond the open door. "You've been very quiet this evening, sweetheart. I hope we haven't upset you with our talk. It was stupid of us to forget that you

ladies would be listening to every word. I promise you the situation's not as black as we may have made it sound."

Bethany shook her head slowly, taking the last, tiny securing stitches in the finished ruffle. "I'm tired, I suppose. Rachel and I have been packing up everything we won't have use for in the next few days. But it's a hard decision to make when we don't know how long it will be before we leave. Waiting and wondering—that's what wears on a person."

What she waited for and wondered about most was when Joshua Stark would quit the fort and return to wherever he had come from. Common sense told her he was not likely to reveal the relationship he had forced on her. Here among her friends that information would bring as much grief to him as it would to her. But what was keeping him idling on at the fort from one day to the next? His mission was accomplished, his message delivered, and it appeared that no one had further need of his services nor he of theirs. What held him then, except some mischief that he was brewing or hoping to brew?

"It's like drawing teeth, getting a decision from that man," Virgil said, his mind still on his captain. "Yet he won't call another council to hear opinions or advice. My fault, probably, because I've no patience with his hemming and hawing. And he's no fonder of me than I am of him. But I've said as much twenty times already."

He sprang up and made a brisk circuit of the room. Then he returned to Bethany's side, watching as she carefully fixed her needle in Rachel's dainty, embroidered needle book.

"There is one good thing I can see about this retreat to Fort Wayne," he said, his voice softening. "It will put us that much closer to Kentucky and my people. First chance I get, I want to take you home to meet them. They'll never believe I could find such a beauty in the heart of the wilderness. And win her besides."

Bethany smiled up into the open adoration of his face. "I'm far from being a beauty. I've looked into enough mirrors to be assured of that," she said to appease the twinge of conscience that was hers for feeling no answering ardor.

"Then your mirror must be flawed. You're more than beautiful: the way you move, the way you speak, the way you carry your head, the way you smile . . ." He gathered both her hands into his and dropped to his knees in front of her so

he could gaze up into her face. "Bethany, let's be wed here, right away, before the order to march. I want to know that you're mine now. I want no questions about my right to look after you on the march."

His earnestness did stir a certain tenderness in her, as if he were a small boy and altogether vulnerable. When the time came, she would do her best to be a good wife to him, she promised herself. When the time came.

"But there's no one here who can marry us," she said. "No judge or minister or anyone." She realized she had been counting heavily on the fact even when she had given him her impulsive consent.

"We can find someone who will serve. Plenty of frontier couples make do without magistrate or preacher when there's none to be had. We can speak our vows in front of witnesses here, and later when we reach a place that's more settled, we can have a conventional ceremony performed if you like."

Bethany could imagine her father's reaction to such an unorthodox wedding should he hear of it. A new resistance stiffened her fingers against the pressure of Virgil's. She saw the whole purpose of this marriage, a bid for respectability, teetering on the brink of defeat.

"What about Captain Heald? Does the commandant of a fort have the same authority as a ship's captain at sea?"

"I don't know. I doubt it. And I wouldn't ask a favor of Heald, particularly one of this sort, if he were the last man on earth." Virgil's grip on her hands tightened so that she winced. "Forgive me, sweetheart," he said, contrite at once, and pressed his lips to her fingers, then her palms. "What about Mr. Kinzie? I'm sure he'd read the service for us. He's a solid, decent, God-fearing man. Would you be willing if he is?"

"I don't know. Let me have some time to think. Let me see how Rachel and Lyle would feel."

"Of course, you must talk it over with them and have time to think about it. I want you to be sure." He stood up, drawing Bethany to her feet with him. "In the meantime, may I speak to Kinzie? We can't be certain how much time we'll have."

She nodded, and submitted to a brush of kisses across her cheeks and mouth. "Sweet, so sweet," he murmured against her temple. "I'll go find Kinzie right away. He's somewhere in the fort tonight. He moved his family in over here today."

In the doorway, he paused, keeping her close in the circle of his arm. "You won't make me wait too long, sweetheart?"

Bethany had only too clear a knowledge of what it was he did not want to wait for, perhaps a clearer knowledge than he did himself. He misread her involuntary shudder as a maidenly tremor of assent. She found herself suddenly crushed against him, enduring a bolder and more fervent kiss than any he had yet ventured.

Afterward, she remained in the doorway where he left her while his shape blurred into the darkness of the parade ground and the crunch of his boots was gradually lost among the other subdued night sounds of the fort. Her senses should have been reeling, her pulse racing, her heart in a happy flutter. Yet she felt more akin to the wooden upright of the doorpost than to any creation of flesh and blood. She wondered vaguely that Virgil Kimbrough never seemed to notice any lack in her—or to care.

"A very touching scene," commented a voice among the shadows beside her.

Her heart jumped—but not for joy.

"*You!*" She turned to confront the tall form detaching itself from the formless darkness below the eaves. "Is that what occupies you these days? Spying on people?"

"What occupies me at present is reclaiming my tobacco pouch, which I left inside on the table," Joshua said reasonably. "It was my ill luck to time my return so that I was faced with a choice between intruding on a very—ahem—personal moment or delaying until the atmosphere was, shall we say, less highly charged."

"How I do admire your delicacy, Mr. Stark." She stepped out of the shelter of the door and to one side, leaving an unobstructed passage for him to go into the house while she stayed discreetly outside. "Please, don't let me delay you any further. I'm sure you'll find your tobacco exactly where you left it."

"On the subject of delicacy, you might consider snuffing the candles behind you before you indulge in tender intimacies in an open door next time. That's not to say that the two of you didn't make a pleasing silhouette."

His own silhouette was barely more than the flicker of a shadow as a sidelong stride brought him over the threshold.

Bethany changed her mind about where the better discretion lay and followed him in. She took care, however, to leave the door standing wide and to position herself in the glow of the candle on the fireplace mantel. Anyone passing by might see without difficulty that she was nowhere near her unwelcome visitor.

"What keeps you here at the fort? Why can't you just go away and leave us alone?"

"I would, if the spectacle of human folly weren't so fascinating everywhere I turn." He flashed a grin at her above the flame of the candle on the table. "Take heart. I doubt there's much more of it I can stomach."

Bethany picked up the hearth broom and began tidying the hearth. Both the grin and the weakness of his stomach, she was fairly sure, referred to the embrace he had just witnessed between her and Virgil. "What a trial it must be for you, obliged to be the only perfect being among all us inferior mortals."

"On the contrary, I'm awed by the ground you've contrived to cover in a few months: fugitive from a cold and calculated marriage to bride of a devoted young officer—by all appearances as dedicated to you as he is to his military calling. A scion of a fine Kentucky family to boot. He's obviously a tolerant, broadminded young man as well—since you've been perfectly honest with him, I suppose, and it hasn't shaken his resolve a jot."

Honest with . . . ? She knew what he meant. It was a problem that had been chafing the back of her mind like a small, hard pebble that wouldn't be dislodged.

"Unless I'm mistaken, he's the sort of man who sets great store on being first in any matter of prowess. I think you would be wise to prepare him for possible disappointment." Joshua weighed the leather pouch of tobacco on his palm, turning it over twice before stuffing it inside his shirt. "On the other hand, if you prefer to protect his cherished illusions until after the knot is securely tied, that may be a wiser course yet."

So it was true, it must be, those hints and whispers she had only half understood in forbidden talk among her girl friends: a man could tell. The pain she had felt that night Joshua had forced her in the inn—the pain that she had never really felt

again, that had been more than just damage done by her frantic struggles, much as she had been trying of late to persuade herself otherwise. It was the price of passage from maiden to woman, a price a husband rightfully expected to exact from a flinching bride. More, it was a price that he glorified in exacting.

Men! Hatred flared in her for all of them, every one. The hearth broom spat a swirl of ashes into the fireplace.

"I should think that from your standpoint, the wisest course would be to counsel me to wait until you're far away from the fort. If I don't, he'll kill you."

"More likely I'd be obliged to kill him. I suspect I am a better shot. And he, being an honorable and fair man, would want satisfaction according to the accepted rules. He wouldn't have the imagination to bring me down from ambush."

"The baseness, you mean." This time the cloud of ashes spun out into the room as she brandished the broom at him.

"Honorable and fair. I wonder you can even use such words when you have no more concept of what they mean than you do of decency or scruple or respect."

He moved one shoulder indifferently. "If you're saying I see no virtue in hewing blindly to the letter of the law regardless of circumstance, you are quite right. It's a trait that you and I would seem to share in common, by the way."

Bethany tightened her grip on the broom, lifting it a little higher as he stepped from behind the table. The flutter of the candle flame gave his eyes a queer, hard glitter that drew her nerves taut. "Keep your distance," she warned.

"Such is my intention." He bowed to her from the center of the room. "By the way of a wedding gift, I offer you the excuse that was given me on my wedding night: you can explain with appropriate tears and blushes that you once assayed to walk a rail fence as a child and fell astride. I was once guileless enough to accept that without question. It's possible your ensign will be, too."

He bowed again, and was gone before Bethany could subdue her internal struggle between humiliation and fury. She could do no more than clench her hands on the broom handle and glare after him.

Chapter IX

Rachel and Lyle found Bethany sitting shaken and pale at the table on their return. To account for her state, she told them of Virgil's proposal of an immediate and unconventional marriage. Rachel's dismay mirrored her own.

"There's no time to get ready," Rachel protested. "A wedding can't happen just on the spur of the moment, even if everything else were in order. And I don't see how a makeshift ceremony like this—no judge, no minister—well, would it really be binding?"

"If the vows are properly solemnized in the presence of witnesses," Lyle said, "I don't see why it shouldn't be. You're forgetting we're at war. It's a matter of what's expedient rather than what's conventional."

Bethany could hardly blame him for considering it more expedient to be responsible for the welfare of only one woman on the forthcoming march instead of two. But if Virgil in righteous outrage should repudiate her on their wedding night, what would become of her then? The question weighed the heavier because there was no one she dared ask.

Predictably, Rachel was beginning to sound more like Lyle by the next morning:

"If we had to, we could pull my wedding dress out of the bottom of the trunk and alter it in a fairly short while to be a passable fit for you." And: "We might ask Mrs. Kinzie's opinion. She knows what army life is like. She was once married to an officer, I believe. She'd been a widow some time when she married Mr. Kinzie." And: "Of course, if we could be sure the situation would be any better at Fort Wayne, for performing a marriage, I mean—but Lyle says there is no way to be positive. And you wouldn't want to wait forever."

At length Bethany was driven to exclaiming, "Why, there's

Sally outside! I'd best give her those gloves I promised her before I forget and pack them."

She snatched the pair of travel-stained gloves from the top of the trunk she had bought in Albany, jammed a bonnet onto her head, and made her escape. Sally had already disappeared into the Healds' quarters.

Bethany debated whether to pursue her there to bestow the gloves, but the strained relations between the captain and Virgil caused her to hesitate. She had awkwardnesses enough to deal with as Ensign Kimbrough's intended without seeking out more. A flush of resentment rose in her at the unfairness of it all. These very gloves were a bitter reminder. She had worn them on the day that had begun with her fleeing her father's house—and had ended with her being robbed of the honor she had thought to save.

She began to stride purposefully across the parade ground with no particular intention in mind—except that she was weary of people, of argument, and of being confined within walls. By the time she reached the sentries at the gate—a smile, a quick word, and her air of resolution winning over their mild protests—she knew exactly what she was going to do.

Luck was hers. Sergeant Jung was not in the stable. No one was, and no one happened to peer in while she was saddling Lunge and stepping from an upturned barrel into the stirrups.

She was quite aware that fort personnel were under orders to stay close to the fort, but she was in no humor to brook interference. When the portion of the esplanade visible through the open door was clear, she collected the reins and rode forward, nudging Lunge into a fast trot as soon as they were beyond the door. If anyone tried to stop her, she would give Lunge his head and claim later that he ran away with her, which wouldn't be too far from the mark: he was restive after several days without exercise and ready for anything.

But no one offered to stop her. There was a commotion of some sort in progress at the gate. Half a dozen Indians were apparently attempting to get into the fort, and the sentries were fully occupied in forbidding them entry. Every other eye in the area, soldier or Indian, was watching the group, too. The casual ease that had existed between white men and red up until less than a week ago was grimly absent.

One of the disputing Indians saw Bethany and turned to

give her a long, studying look before returning his attention to the argument.

To her surprise, Bethany recognized him. He was Little Hawk, one of the Potawatomi chiefs who had startled her and Rachel by paying them an uninvited visit. Shortly after, he and his companions had returned to their village, which Virgil said was a considerable distance away. But of course, they were here again because of the messages Captain Heald had sent out to the various bands, advising them of the distribution of stores and factory goods soon to take place.

Well, that was the men's concern and none of hers. Virgil was occupied today in taking inventory of the goods on hand in the factory. Bethany swung her head and Lunge's toward the open prairie, dismissing a vague disquiet at having been so pointedly recognized; dismissing, too, a shout behind her that sounded like her name and—to her overwrought nerves—as though the voice was Joshua's. A touch of her heel put Lunge into a gallop. Soon she had left the fort and its complications to their own devices.

Her course, angling wide of the river and the Indian encampments along it, carried her at last through the whir of grasshoppers and the warble of bobolinks to the lake shore and the dunes. But the sun was too hot to allow for long meditation on the top of the unprotected sand hills. She guided Lunge down the slope to the water's edge. While he drank, she sat frowning at her gloves—those soiled gloves she had unthinkingly pulled on after having resolved never to wear them again.

The splash of spent waves on the beach muffled the sound of an approaching horseman until he was almost upon her. Bethany glimpsed him slanting in from her left in the same moment that Lunge raised his head and nickered. Instantly she reined Lunge around in a tight circle and kicked him into a run on the hard-packed wet sand of the beach.

Lunge was a willing runner, but prolonged speed was not his strongest asset. The other horse inexorably closed the gap between them. Before the race had stretched a quarter of a mile, both horses were shoulder to shoulder. Bethany tried to swerve away, ignoring the other rider's shouted command for her to pull up. A hand shot out and clamped itself on Lunge's bridle.

"What do you think you are doing?" Bethany demanded, striking a futile fist at the knotted hand as the horses were pulled back to a walk.

"That's a question you ought to be answering," Joshua said through tight lips. "What the devil do you think you're up to, riding off alone like that in a country full of hostile Indians? Or hasn't it penetrated your pretty head yet that this whole situation is a powder keg that only needs one little incident to blow everything sky high?"

"And hasn't it penetrated your thick skull yet that I'd prefer a hundred hostile Indians to you?" She jerked at the reins in another unsuccessful attempt to regain control. "What I do is no business of yours. Just you leave me alone! What do you care, you of all people, what happens to me?"

"I wish to hell I knew. Except that trading is my business and anything that is going to stir the Indians up like a swarm of hornets is going to be bad for business."

He was guiding the horses in a wide arc to set them back in the direction from which they had come.

Bethany kicked free of her stirrups and slid to the ground. "Then go tend to your business and leave me to mine. I have no intention of upsetting your precious trading, or of ever seeing you again if I can possibly avoid it."

Head high and spine rigid, she set off on foot at the best pace she could muster through the sand. For the moment, she had no plan more definite than to get herself anywhere that he was not—the refuge offered by the tall grasses beyond the dunes, perhaps.

It didn't matter. She had covered less than a score of yards when he was beside her, then with another furious stride standing in front of her, barring her path.

"You self-righteous little ninny!" He grasped her by the arms just below her shoulders and shook her. "Keep acting the fool, and you well may get your wish never to see me again—nor anybody else. If you had any sense, you'd be begging me instead to take you off to my place right now before the lid blows off here."

Bethany drew in a sharp breath and glared at him. "Thank you. That's a pleasure I can forgo."

"That's a pleasure you *will* forgo, I'll warrant, if you marry your languishing ensign." His fingers relaxed their pressure

slightly. "That puppy has no more idea how to strike a spark from a woman that he does how to fly. Don't jerk your chin at me. I've seen how he kisses you and how you look when he does it—like you're downing a dose of medicine."

"I don't choose to discuss my private actions and Ensign Kimbrough's with you. It happens he is a gentleman, something far beyond your ken. He believes in honor and virtue and respects a woman accordingly."

"And you think that will satisfy you for the rest of your life, honor and respect? No fire? No passion? You?"

His eyes, so intense a blue in his dark face, were probing hers, and she saw the anger in them changing to a light no less fierce. She twisted to break from under his hands as they moved up to cup her shoulders, but his mouth was already on hers, stifling her outcry and pressing her head back until she could bend no farther.

"I—hate you," she gasped when she could speak again.

"I'm sure. And with a burning passion."

He pulled her hard against him. The second kiss was deeper and longer and seemed to draw into itself all the heat of the afternoon sun. She felt his hand working at the fastenings of her dress, his knee thrusting her thighs apart, herself pinioned helplessly in the bend of his arm.

The pink calico slipped from her shoulders, baring them to the sun, and slipped lower. He imprisoned her flailing hands in his while he trailed his lips downward over the swell of her breast to linger at the nipple. No writhe or turn or wrench of hers was of any effect except to yield him a further advantage. He went on ruthlessly awakening her body to the wild sensations and responses he himself had taught it until, at last, a thundering pulse in her temple clamored the folly of struggling anymore. He would have his way finally, whatever she did. The sooner she submitted, the sooner it would be over.

She shut her eyes to the brilliant sparkle of the blue lake beyond his shoulder, and let herself go limp as he gathered her up in his arms and carried her to a bed of coarse grass in the shade of a dune.

Chapter X

The crowning insult, to Bethany's mind, was that Joshua brazenly escorted her miles across the prairie back to the fort in the late afternoon for all the world as if his own concern had been to see that she came to no harm. He did do her the courtesy of parting from her before they quite reached the esplanade, but as a result she was left alone to face the wrath of Sergeant Jung at the stable. He was livid with fury at her for having appropriated a mount unassisted and against orders, and with fear, she gathered, of what penalty might be imposed on him for not having been on hand to stop her. He dared not say too much, she being an officer's lady, but what he did left her feeling more ill used than ever.

Rachel flew across the room to meet her the instant Bethany crossed the threshold. "Bethany! Where have you been? Where were you?"

"I went for a ride out to the dunes," Bethany said, stirred by the first pricklings of contrition. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you. I just wanted to get off somewhere to think."

But Rachel was hardly listening. Her face was as pale as though dusted with flour, and she couldn't seem to stop talking. "I didn't know where you were. Or Lyle, or anyone, and I was so scared. I thought we were all going to be massacred."

"Massacred?"

"Some young Indians pushed their way past the sentries at the gate and right on into headquarters. One of them picked up a rifle and fired a shot in the Healds' parlor. I ran outside to see what the noise was and where you were, and Mrs. Jung and the sergeant and some others were crying that it was a signal for the Indians to swarm in and kill us."

"You ran outside? Rachel, you could have been shot, too." Bethany turned involuntarily to push the door shut

against a parade ground that was as quiet now under the afternoon sun as it ever had been.

"I know, but I didn't think. Anyway, it was a false alarm, or at least the old chiefs managed to talk their young men into behaving. But for a while the chiefs were going to and fro, and the squaws were scurrying around gathering up their children, and everyone was running every which way, and I was so scared—" Rachel's voice broke on the edge of a sob. "And I didn't know what had become of you."

"I didn't think, either. I'm sorry, Rachel. I'm so sorry." The trials and stresses of her own afternoon caught up to Bethany, and her voice shook, too.

Rachel asked no questions. She flung her arms around Bethany, and Bethany hugged her, and each wept away the bulk of the reproaches and remorse on the other's shoulder.

Lyle's censure when he came home was less easily turned aside, however. "You cannot disregard an official order for the sake of personal whims," he told Bethany sternly. "Orders are issued for a reason. The massacre alarm this afternoon should be proof of that. Because we were fortunate today doesn't mean there's no longer any cause for caution."

What he wanted was her confession that she had acted irresponsibly and her promise that she would not do so again. These extracted from her, he was willing to let the incident become a minor footnote to the graver implications of the day. It did not occur to him, either, to ask her how she had spent the hours she was absent from the fort.

It was Virgil, presenting himself on the Pages' doorstep as soon as he was off duty and just in time to be invited to supper, a circumstance that was becoming habitual, who had questions.

"What I don't understand is why," he said again and again, pacing beside her, behind her, around her as she moved between table and hearth. "I couldn't credit my ears when Corporal Bowen told me my bride-to-be had been out of the fort for the better part of the afternoon, against orders, without permission, gone nobody-knew-where. Can you imagine how I felt?"

"I've told you where: I rode out to the dunes and along the shore. I needed space to put things straight in my mind,"

Bethany answered patiently, but by the tenth repetition her patience was starting to fray at the seams. "It didn't seem like such a crime when I did it. And it wasn't my intention to be gone quite so long. It—it just happened."

He bent above her while she mounded biscuits on a plate. His tone became one of exaggerated tolerance as if he were straining to the utmost to make allowances for the limitations of an idiot. "And what was your intention? That is what I'm trying to discover. I can't believe you could be so careless of your friends' feelings or your own peril. But I am unable to see what other purpose your actions served beyond providing the intrepid Mr. Stark an opportunity to play the hero by galloping gloriously off to find you."

A biscuit rolled from the top of the mound and fell to the floor. What would he say if he knew how swiftly the gloriously heroic Mr. Stark had reverted to the pirate he was, keeping her captive among the stunted willows and cedar brush of the dunes through the afternoon hours, enjoying his plunder to the full? And how he had compounded her humiliation by reducing her inexorably to a clutching, clinging accomplice.

During the moment that she was kneeling to retrieve the fallen biscuit and set it aside, she considered spilling out the whole story of the afternoon. Now was the time to rid herself of a miserable secret, now if ever. If she told it with appropriate tears, hysterics, and faintings, none of which she would scarcely have to feign . . .

But she shut the possibility from her mind as she straightened up. Christiana and Francis had taught her too well how difficult it was for the righteous to forgive the victim of an injury for having been there to suffer it. Virgil was already showing a nasty humor because of the manner in which her behavior might reflect on him.

Shakily, she said, "Do you dare to suggest that my intention was to be followed by Mr. Stark?"

"I was suggesting merely that Mr. Stark seems to have a knack for being on hand when there are heroic feats to be performed: like carrying messages through the wilderness, or racing to the rescue of maidens that belong to other men. And there I was, counting blankets like any dolt of a clerk, without an inkling of anything."

Bethany stifled a desire to shake him. Suppose he repeated his grievances in Joshua's hearing? Joshua was just arrogant enough to intimate to him that he might have better cause for his jealousy than he knew. And who would be the one who ultimately paid for their rooster struttings? She would.

"I'm devastated that my distress should have put your honor at such hazard," she said, and twitched her skirts past him to return to the hearth.

Rachel put a hand on his sleeve. "What you don't understand, Ensign, is how important a woman's wedding is to her. I believe that Napoleon and all his armies could have landed at Boston harbor, and my first concern still would have been where Lyle and I were going to stand in my aunt's parlor and whether the sun would be in the minister's eyes and how we could crowd in enough chairs to accommodate everyone. Poor Bethany has to weigh considerations a lot graver than that."

"None of us is totally happy that the wedding has to be at such short notice and under these circumstances," he said stiffly. The pulse at his temple was a visible bulge as he struggled to maintain his reasonable tone. "But I had supposed we could keep our feelings a matter of discussion between ourselves without turning them into a subject of public comment."

Bethany's resentment boiled over. "Perhaps you'd prefer to skip the wedding altogether and get right on to the wife beating. Or do you simply intend to keep me locked behind doors, mind and body, after we're married?"

"If I thought either measure would be necessary after you become my wife . . ." He and Bethany exchanged glare for glare, the flush in his face darkening as she refused to lower her eyes before his.

Abruptly he swung on his heel and marched out of the house. Rachel's dismayed reminder that he was invited to share their supper fell on empty air. "Oh, Bethany!" she breathed in a mixture of bewilderment and regret while Bethany stood astounded, trying to tell herself she didn't care.

The logical sequel to such a day should have been a sleepless night. Bethany dared not even ask sympathy or aid for the sunburn that was radiating heat from her arms, shoul-

ders, and chest because there was no way to explain how the sun's rays had penetrated so fiercely to areas supposedly protected by the fabric of her gown. Yet when bedtime came, she spent only a few minutes in restless searching for the least painful position in which to lie before drifting into as deep and relaxed a slumber as she had known in months. Perhaps it was that the ordeal of the day had left her utterly drained. But perhaps, too, it was that Joshua Stark had unwittingly done her a favor.

His seizure of her on the road to Albany had sprung from a will to punish her, in part for his imagined insult at her hands but more for his betrayal by another woman. Despite her many small defiances, she had been dominated by fear of him and suffocated by a sense of helplessness. The residue of that experience had left her numb to the touch of any man.

He had acted from anger on the lake shore, too, but the anger had been only an excuse. What he had done was exactly what he had wanted to do: he had taken her because he could; because it pleased him to; because he wanted her.

"Strong wine," he had muttered against her shoulder when, their energies spent at last, they had lain quiet awhile on the sparse grass. "You're a heady draught."

They were phrases he had spoken often in the past, knowing how unwelcome to her was such praise. But this time the tone had been rueful more than derisive, as if the turn of the afternoon's events had taken him somewhat by surprise, too. He had given the lie to his stand that she was an object of total indifference to him. When the chance had offered itself, he had wanted her more than he had wanted to maintain the pretense.

The discovery was hardly cause for elation on her part, but it made him vulnerable as he had not been before. And it bestowed on her a subtle new power that might reverse the roles of conqueror and victim between them.

"If it's so true that your post, wherever it is, is a better place to be now than the fort, why don't you just keep riding till you get there?" she had suggested, testing, when he caught the strayed horses to return to the fort.

"That's close to being what I intend. But not without first restoring you to the eager arms of your ensign." He crooked an eyebrow at her. "Or are you begging asylum, after all? It

could be entertaining for both of us, I'm sure, although a heavy burden on my conscience if I thought I had influenced you to change your mind about marrying."

Carefully, she said, "We shall probably be wed within the next few days."

"Probably?" He had picked up the qualifying word as she had guessed and willed he would.

Bethany had looked down on him from her saddle through eyes veiled to hide her wakening sense of power. He was only a man like other men, his brow damp from the heat of the day, a razor nick red on the side of his chin, a blue shadow of beard already beginning to show.

"Probably," she said without inflection. And left him to conclude what he would.

The result, she was almost positive, would be that nothing could budge him from the vicinity of the fort these next few days whatever his previous inclination. It was an odd stroke to count that a victory when not long since she would have given her dearest treasure to know he had departed the place never to return. But she was imagining how gratifying it would be to make Joshua Stark dance to her tune for a change—and then leave him disappointed at the last.

The sweet thought of revenge bouyed her through most of the next day. She half expected he would find some pretext to drop in on her and Rachel or Lyle. But when the day ended without bringing him, she was amused rather than vexed. Let him play his game of indifference. He couldn't stay away forever. For her part, she had kept indoors all day so he should have no glimpse of her without seeking it.

Less amusing was Virgil's pointed absence throughout the day.

"Don't fret yourself," Rachel sympathized. "He'll be back. He's too much in love to let a misunderstanding stand in the way for long. If he doesn't stop by for supper tonight, I'll have Lyle invite him especially for tomorrow. Once the two of you are together again, matters will mend themselves. You'll see."

Bethany was surprised by how real was the pang she felt when supper time came and Virgil did not. Then, thinking it over, she was more disturbed that she should have been

surprised. She had ridden to the dunes to sort through the jumble of conflicts in her mind. But she seemed to have brought back a greater set of confusions than ever.

Lyle had little encouragement to offer. He answered the women's questions and suggestions with random monosyllables that made it plain that the stony path to romance was the least of his concerns. His thin features were narrowed into somber planes and angles that withered any attempt at conversation during supper. He was reluctant to talk of what was troubling him except to repeat that it was nothing until Rachel finally burst out:

"Something's wrong. I know that. Whatever it is, it can't be worse than the dozen different possibilities you're leaving Bethany and me to imagine."

Lyle frowned at the fire and rubbed his palm back and forth across his chin. "It's nothing for you to worry about. Captain Heald has called for all the tribes in the neighborhood to meet for a council on the esplanade tomorrow afternoon so he can tell them his plans. We're not sure what he's going to say, that's all, and we wish we were. We—Helm and Kimbrough and I—intend to be in the blockhouses with the cannon trained on the esplanade to discourage any unruly elements that might crop up."

Two or three more questions from Rachel failed to extract any further details beyond the fact that Captain Heald had consented only grudgingly to this display of poor faith toward what he still considered his Indian friends. Bethany, imagining what a high state of temper Virgil must be in after such a clash, realized it might be as well that he hadn't come by this evening. He would be cooler and more ripe for reconciliation tomorrow. And Joshua, undoubtedly watching from somewhere, would be drawing who knew what foolish conclusions from Virgil's absence.

Bethany and Rachel gladly accepted Margaret Helm's invitation the next day to spend the anxious hours of the council sewing and talking in her quarters with herself and her mother, Mrs. Kinzie. The commanding officer's wife was invited, too. But it was Sally, her dark young face nearly lost in the depths of an oversized bonnet, who appeared at the door in her stead, bearing a plate of crullers and an apology.

"Mrs. Heald say she's sorry, but she's lying down with one of her bad headaches." Sally rolled her eyes expressively and added, "It's the heat, I guess, and her being scared the captain'll get killed out there like that Mr. Stark said."

"Oh, surely not," Margaret exclaimed. "Mr. Stark didn't tell her such a thing."

"No, ma'am. One of the young officers—I don't know which—that's who he told. Then they tell the other two, and Mr. Kinzie and the captain, but the captain, he don't believe it. Mr. Stark say he have it from an Indian friend how the young men gonna jump up and kill all the white officers when they get outside to the council."

Bethany's finger went to her mouth to soothe a jab from her needle. From the short stillness in the room, Joshua's communication was news to the three other women, too.

Mrs. Kinzie was the first to rally. "Perhaps she doesn't know that the junior officers have put the warning to good use. And Mr. Kinzie is with Captain Heald at the council. He's not a man to do anything foolhardy." She took the plate of sweets from Sally and set it on a side table. "I think I'll just go back with Sally and see what I can do for Mrs. Heald. You girls can entertain yourselves."

They did a fair job of appearing to be entertained: keeping their needles active, nibbling at the crullers and Margaret's offering of fresh gingerbread, sipping tea, talking about everything. But their ears were on the alert for the boom of a cannon, their pulses ready to race at any sound that might be a shout or a war whoop.

For Bethany, there was the added distraction of trying to reconcile the Joshua she knew—mocking, cynical, without conscience, without ties—with the man who might prove to be the hero of the hour. She bit her lip to master a smile. Was he by chance less free of ties than he liked to believe?

She was putting the last stitches in the set of towels she was hemming, and Rachel was folding away the shirt that was to be a birthday surprise for Lyle, when the crunch of footsteps outside brought Margaret to her feet. The door opened to admit Lieutenant Helm, looking hot, rumpled, and glum.

"The council's over," he said in answer to the three

anxious faces wordlessly questioning him. "The captain has the Indians' agreement to escort us to Fort Wayne. In return, he's promised them not just the goods in the factory but the surplus provisions and ammunition in the fort as well. We're to distribute everything to them tomorrow."

"Ammunition?" Margaret breathed.

He sighed and nodded. "Your father's bending Heald's ear right now, trying to change his mind, but I doubt the captain's convinced even yet that these Indians aren't friendly anymore. Luckily we were one jump ahead of them or he might have found out—to his sorrow. Page and Kimbrough are still in the blockhouses, securing things."

"What of Mr. Stark?" Rachel asked, voicing the question Bethany was beginning to fear she would have to ask herself. "A man of his experience, won't his opinion be valuable, too?"

The lieutenant was lifting the dipper from the water bucket, about to take a long drink. "Mr. Stark?" he said above the dripping rim, and shook his head. "He's gone. He packed up and rode off early yesterday."

There must have been more discussion of the general situation before Bethany and Rachel tied on their bonnets and returned to their own quarters. But in retrospect, Bethany could remember nothing but the sensation of having stepped off a step that wasn't there. The jolt brought her fond schemes crashing down around her in splinters.

Gone? Of course he was gone. Who but a stupid, self-dramatizing little fool could have fancied that Joshua's actions would ever be shaped by interest in another human being—regardless of a momentary attraction? And what had led her to suppose she had been the attraction? Hadn't she profited enough from past experience to know that what attracted him was the chance to impose his will on another's—to take from anyone what he pleased when it pleased him? She had been preening herself, mentally posing on the strength of her imaginary appeal, forgetting how much cause she had to hate the man.

That was the splinter that stabbed the deepest. It kept her silent as she and Rachel went about the business of filling the kettle and wiping the table in preparation for supper. She had

allowed herself to become no better than he. No, worse than he, for she had been his better at the start and so had fallen farther. Her pride disintegrated under a tide of shame that left her washed clean of all pretense and facing the rock-bare truth about herself and what she must do.

She was braced and ready when Lyle came in. But he was alone.

"Where's Ensign Kimbrough?" Rachel asked. "You invited him, didn't you?"

"I did, and he promised to be here. He was still puttering at something in the east blockhouse the last I saw of him. Probably's lost track of time." Lyle reached for the cap he had just hung on a peg. "Want me to go fetch him?"

"Why don't I go?" Bethany's hands clenched on each other under her apron. "That would be all right, wouldn't it?"

Rachel beamed her delight at the prospect of a reconciliation. "I can't think why not. Yes, do go, and don't rush. There's plenty of time."

Bethany could not have rushed to this ordeal if her life depended on it. But she was resolved to see it through, for her own sake as well as Virgil's. Virgil—honest, honorable, earnest—deserved to know the truth before he married her. Then if he would not marry her—she would face that when she had to.

The soldier posted at the blockhouse entrance grinned instead of challenging her. "He's upstairs, I think, Miss Herbert, studying the lay of the land or something. I doubt he'll mind a pleasant interruption about now."

She had to pause a few steps inside the door, adjusting her eyes to the heavy twilight of a room without windows. It was a barren chamber, earth-floored and unfurnished except for a bench along one wall. The only light was that filtering down from a square opening in the floor above.

There were small stirrings overhead, someone moving about. Bethany walked to the sturdy ladder that descended from the opening. But with her foot on the bottom rung, her courage fled. She couldn't go up there into the light, into that confined space. Down here there was a door through which to retreat—here she would make her confession.

"Virgil," she called upward.

"Yes?" His face appeared in the opening. "Who . . . Bethany!"

"Yes. I'd like to speak to you if I may. There's something I have to say."

He was swinging down the ladder and at her side before all the words were out. "There's nothing that you have to say, dearest, except that you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

She drew back from the impetuous reach of his hands for hers. He was in his shirt-sleeves. Dark patches of sweat stuck the material to his shoulders; a black smudge, possibly gunpowder, slanted across his forehead and one cheek. Never had he looked more youthful or fresh or unsullied.

"No, there are things that ought to be said. You were right to be angry. If I could have known—"

"I'm the one who should have known," he broke in. "A young lady, gently bred, so far from home with no guardian to turn to, no one to guide you, how could you be expected to have the judgment of a veteran sergeant? But that's why I love you and why you need me. Don't you see?"

Bethany's lungs were laboring for breath in the thick air of this windowless room. If she did not spill out her confession in a rush and without distractions, her resolution might not hold.

Perhaps she swayed a little, for Virgil's arm went around her in a gesture of support. She made a small sound halfway between a gasp and a protest as he pulled her close against him.

"I've missed you so, sweetheart. I've been miserable these past two days," he said into the crown of her bonnet. "Let's be married right away, tomorrow, so nothing like this can part us again."

He was kissing her, her cheeks, her nose, her mouth—hard, darting kisses that gave her no chance to respond. She moved within the awkward angle of his arms, waiting for it to form a supple clasping of her body to his, waiting for the kisses to become longer, slower, more demandingly persuasive. Her baffled disappointment yielded to a sudden, appalling revelation: *she was waiting for him to become Joshua!*

"Say yes, sweetheart," Virgil was urging. "Yes to tomorrow."

How Joshua would gloat! How he would crow because she could never be free of him. Well, she was free. She would not have her life poisoned forever by a demon like him. Nor Virgil Kimbrough's life either.

"Yes," she whispered. "Tomorrow. As soon as you say."

Chapter XI

Bethany Herbert Kimbrough turned in her saddle for a final look at the log walls of Fort Dearborn as Lunge bore her away in the midst of a column of mounted soldiers and military dependents.

Less than an hour ago, right hand pressed respectfully to her heart and eyes unexpectedly moist, she had listened to the notes of retreat sounded by the garrison trumpeter as the flag slowly descended the flagstaff in front of the post headquarters. No breath of a breeze broke through the oppressive heat of the August morning to stir the red and white stripes and circle of stars on their field of blue to even one last defiant flourish as the limp folds were gathered into the waiting arms of the soldiers below. Already the fort had an air of desolation, the blockhouses staring blankly, the parade ground deserted, the gates standing agape without a sentry to challenge the Indian women and children beginning to wander inside.

"Them red bastards," came a mutter from a corporal riding slightly ahead of her. "Can't even hold off till we're decently out of sight before they're shoving in to see what more plunder they can get."

Beside Bethany, Rachel sniffed damply and fumbled for a handkerchief. Her horse took instant advantage of her slackened control to sidestep and stretch its neck for a tuft of grass. Rachel, unprepared and never at her best on horseback, lurched forward and all but lost her reins entirely.

Bethany leaned out to retrieve them for her, pulling the horse into line again in the process.

"Oh, Bethany." Rachel gave her a wan smile of thanks. "Maybe I should have followed my instincts and begged for a seat in the baggage wagon."

Bethany flung a glance at the baggage wagon trundling along in the rear with a cargo of a dozen children perched on boxes, trunks, and barrels. She contrived a smile of her own

to cover the thought that if anything were to go wrong—anything that might call for speed and mobility to escape it—a plodding, laden wagon was not where she would want to be.

"We'll keep close together," she promised. "You won't have any trouble, anyway, once we've settled into the pace."

Rachel collected her reins more firmly and set her lips as if maintaining her seat in the saddle was her greatest concern of the moment.

Perhaps that was better than being diverted, as Bethany was, by the rider who chose this time to canter by on his way to the head of the line. She recognized him as Captain Welles, the kidnapped-Kentucky-boy-become-Miami-chief. The junior officers had set great store on his influence on behalf of the Americans.

Captain Welles and twelve of his Miamis had arrived yesterday at the fort for exactly that purpose, but they were just twenty-four hours too late. The day before, Captain Heald had distributed blankets, paints, broadcloth, and the other goods among the assembled Potawatomi. Under cover of darkness that same night—Bethany's wedding night—details of men had knocked in barrels of liquor, emptied them into the river, and thrown muskets, bags of flints, screws, and shot into the well inside the sally port. Only twenty-five rounds of ammunition had been reserved for use by the troops, plus a box of cartridges in the baggage wagon. Not enough to serve in any real fight, Virgil and Lyle had glumly agreed, but as much as it was possible to carry on the long march. It had been a noisy operation despite the attempts at secrecy, and the Indians had not been slow to grasp what was happening. They had expressed their anger at a council held the next day. No speeches from Captain Welles or any other chiefs seeking to quiet the rising murmurs and threats of revenge had swayed the young braves in the slightest from their resentment.

This morning Captain Welles had blackened his face and tied his long hair back with a black ribbon. Whether he was mourning his failure or proclaiming his view of the general situation, Bethany did not know, but the sight of him was like cold fingers laid on the nape of her neck and a colder fist in her stomach.

Lunge reacted to him as well, flinging his head up, flattening his ears, and snorting a distaste for Indian smell that did not make allowances for those who had been born white. She was thankful the band of Potawatomie escorting the march had chosen to ride in advance of the column instead of alongside. Glad, too, that Rachel's mount appeared not to share Lunge's skittishness.

Bethany narrowed her eyes against the sun in an attempt to locate Lyle up toward the front, wishing he could find a reason to ride closer to Rachel. For Virgil, of course, there was no position except as near to the van of the procession as he could be.

She flexed her shoulders, feeling the small, hard discomfort that lay against her skin beneath a button of her riding habit. Virgil had not had a wedding ring to give her nor any way to get one, so he had slid his own heavy gold signet ring onto her finger at the appropriate point in the ceremony. Because it was too large for her hand, she wore it on a ribbon around her neck; soon she must adjust the length of the ribbon or risk being chafed raw during the journey.

The line of march was swinging toward the lake, along roughly the same route she had ridden in such desperation less than a week ago. What an innocent she had been! Tormenting herself because she'd supposed she knew all there was to know. What an innocent and a goose!

Her wedding night had been unlike anything she could have anticipated. Virgil had come to their wedding bed tired and tense from long hours spent destroying firearms and spirits that would otherwise have fallen to their enemies. With no more preliminaries than a kiss and a sweep of his hand through her loosened hair, he had flung himself on her with a single-minded concentration on achieving his own satisfaction—taking no heed of her gasp of protest or her cry of genuine pain. She had felt she was being raped once more. But cries and gasps were what Virgil expected of a bride on her wedding bed. They were the confirmation of her purity as was her feeble resistance; they inflamed him to even hotter masculinity.

What he did not expect was that any gently bred young woman could find pleasure herself in the act—or would want to if she could. Therefore his only consideration was to gratify himself as swiftly and directly as possible. Last night,

their second night together, she had ventured to hint that she might be more responsive if wooed a little at the start. His chill incredulity had reduced her to abashed silence. The lesson was in no way sweetened by her recollection that Joshua, aside from the first night, had never inflicted physical pain on her. Or by the observation that her husband's competence in answering his needs betrayed him to be no novice at it.

Nevertheless, she was not sorry to be Mrs. Kimbrough. Outside of the bedroom, Virgil was a tender and solicitous husband, resourceful and sure in their preparations for the march. It was good to know he would be close by through the hazardous days until they reached Fort Wayne.

A volley of shots exploded back in the direction of the fort. Mrs. Jung, the stable sergeant's wife, let out a scream amazingly shrill for so heavy a woman. It launched a flurry of other cries up and down the line.

"You're not hit, woman," said the old corporal testily. "Save your breath for when you are. They're killing the cattle we left to them. Take heart they've got that to occupy them."

"They won't be occupied long, slaughtering the poor beasts full tilt like that. Then we'll be next. You mark my words," Mrs. Jung retorted. She sounded as if she might count it a disappointment not to be proven right.

The post band struck up a tune; the pace of the column quickened slightly. Bethany fought down an urge to put Lunge to a gallop and outdistance them all, especially the fort and the continuing gunshots and panicky bellows. Pride would not let her twist for a cowardly look at what was happening behind her, but each shot sent a quiver through her flesh. She wondered if her face was as pale as Rachel's. Or her smile of encouragement as taut.

The line of march swung south along the lake shore. A mile gradually unfolded between them and the fort. A mile and a half. Two. The familiar shapes of the sand dunes began to rise up ahead. Bethany relaxed a bit as the Potawatomi escort—some five hundred painted warriors—wheeled their ponies up onto the prairie on the far side of the sand hills while the troops kept to the beach. The more widely they were separated, Indians and whites, the better.

Another half mile or so. Then a shout from up front. It was Captain Welles riding back from his advance position with his Miamis. Bethany couldn't make out what he was shouting, but there was urgency in the sweep of his arm toward the dunes now forming a solid bulwark alongside them.

Next the officers—Captain Heald, Lieutenant Helm, Lyle, Virgil—were shouting orders that were no more intelligible to her. The elderly corporal in front of her put spurs to his horse and dashed forward. All the soldiers, a scant seventy-five of them, surged into a military formation of sorts.

"Ambush!" "Attack!" The words crackled in the air, coming from nowhere and everywhere.

A volley of shots burst from a ravine between the dunes and the prairie. A yell—was it Virgil's voice?—set the troops charging pellmell up the slope. In an instant, the noise of gunfire was deafening.

Bethany saw the old corporal pitch sidelong from his saddle. He lay motionless where he landed, his cap gone, his white hair darkening under a spreading red stain while spent balls continued to kick up puffs of sand around him.

"Bethany!" Rachel screamed.

But Bethany could not reply. Lunge was responding to the sudden pandemonium by rearing and bucking. Women were shrieking, horses neighing, guns cracking. Bethany battled to bring him under a semblance of control. When she could spare a glance for Rachel, Rachel was not there.

"Rachel!"

Rachel's riderless mount dashed by her, heading for the prairie. Rachel, a half-dozen rods to the rear of where Bethany had last seen her, was getting unsteadily to her feet near the water's edge.

"Run!" Bethany screamed at her.

But, of course, Rachel could not hear her above the tumult. Nor was there any place to run to. The lake barred them on one side; the dunes, spitting death, on the other. Mounted Indians were galloping onto the beach itself above and below the disputed hill, uttering whoops, brandishing tomahawks, riding down terrified women.

A warrior on a black pony had Mrs. Jung's horse by the bridle. Mrs. Jung was beating at the Indian with a club she had acquired somewhere. A second warrior rode up on the

opposite side of the woman and swung his tomahawk. Through all the uproar, Bethany heard the hideous *chunk* of a skull being crushed in.

She turned Lunge around to go back for Rachel, but never reached her. Lunge staggered and uttered a shriek. Bethany kicked her feet from the stirrups and jumped clear as he went down. He lay on the hot sand, legs jerking, bloody froth bubbling from his nostrils.

She cast a frantic look around. Wounded and dying horses littered the beach. The handful of soldiers had gained the top of the hill, but their ranks were scattered and thinning. Bodies in army blue were strewn the length of the slope.

Through the haze of gunsmoke, she saw one man halfway to the top sway in mid-stride and go down. He stumbled drunkenly onto one knee, swaying even more. But his musket came up, wavered, and steadied on a target screened by a willow brush. The man was Virgil.

Bethany started to run to him. A trio of Indians charged toward the slope, dividing her from him. She whirled, still running, some desperate notion in the back of her mind that she might yet escape if she could find a hiding place—a depression in the dunes, perhaps, or the tall grass of the prairie.

The mangled remains of Mrs. Jung lay in her path. A raw spot glared on the top of her head where pale red hair had been. Bethany gathered her skirts in both hands and sprang over the corpse. There would be time later to be horrified, if she survived.

She snatched at the reins of a riderless horse. For a moment her fingers closed on the leather. But the terror-stricken animal reared and broke away, pounding off toward the prairie. Crazy, she ran after it: past another downed horse thrashing in vain to regain its feet; around a woman's body, bonnetless and scalped; behind the hooves of a dancing Indian pony.

The Indian brought his pony about and raced in thundering pursuit of her. As he drew near, sun glint leaped from the blade of a hatchet arcing downward toward the side of her head.

Bethany shrank together and hurled herself aside. She felt the wind of the blow as it narrowly missed her, the sting of

sand spun into her face by passing hooves, and the jarring impact as her hip and shoulder struck the ground.

The warrior flung himself from the pony. Bethany was rolling up onto her knees as he rushed at her again, hatchet uplifted. She leaped to her feet, her head butting into his raised arm from beneath, deflecting his blow once more. But this time it left a burning sensation across the back of her shoulder.

She threw herself against his chest, wrapping her arms and legs around him in a wild, wrestling embrace before he could rally for a third blow. He dropped the hatchet and grappled with her. Bethany clung to him like death, kicking, clutching, clawing. Where he loosened her hold in one place, she tightened it in another. The pain searing her shoulder was of no matter. She didn't expect to live out the next five minutes, but she intended to sell her life dearly.

What she wanted was the sheathed knife that hung from his neck. Twice she grabbed for it and missed. Then an ill-judged twist of his shoulder, a lucky snatch of her hand, and it was hers.

She did not pause to think. Quick as reflex, she drove the blade with all her ebbing strength at the spot where she supposed his heart would be. The blade struck bone and turned in her hand. Her grip was broken by the jolt to her wrist. He wrenched the weapon from her, but blood spurted from a gash across the painted design on his chest.

Shouts of derisive laughter surrounded her and her foe. A hand clamped his forearm, staying the knife. Bethany's chest was locked in the circle of a brawny arm, and she was dragged backward and away. The first Indian lunged to follow her, but he was hemmed in by other warriors, who appeared greatly amused by his defeat. He could only glare.

She had the strange idea that despite the streaks and swirls of paint disguising him, she had seen that face before—that flattened, off-center nose—Crooked Nose, that's who he was. One of the party of Indians who had planted themselves on the parlor floor for a visit during her first week at the fort. She and Rachel had fed him and his fellows with their own hands that day. The discovery drove home to Bethany the reality of what was happening as nothing else had yet done.

Her captor continued to half drag, half push her through the

sand. She was pinioned against him, her arms useless, her feet unable to gain any solid footing. The smell of him, of sweat and grease and smoke, nearly choked her.

It flashed through her mind that she should be gathering her thoughts in these final moments, preparing herself to meet her Maker. She should be praying for divine mercy, acknowledging her sins, composing herself to accept the Almighty's will.

Instead, she bent her head in a futile attempt to sink her teeth into the arm that imprisoned her. Her captor grunted. His arm tightened with a jerk that pressed the air from her lungs in a gasp. She tried again, and kicked as well, in a vague hope of tangling his leg with hers and bringing him down. It sounded to her as if he chuckled—no, actually laughed—in the split second before his free hand smashed against the side of her head. All sensation spun away in an explosion of jagged lights.

She revived, choking in earnest, snatching at breath before chill water rushed over her head. Thrashing frantically, she lifted her nose and chin above the surface. The sky pinwheeled above her. It dissolved into a world of blurred sound and distorted images as she went under once more. She was in the lake, submerged in water that was achingly cold. There was no bottom, nothing her feet could touch. She was drowning.

The iron arms of her captor loosened in response to her struggles, tightened, slipped higher under her arms, lower around her waist, but never let her go. In her fear, she spent her energy lavishly, floundering, bobbing, plunging to be free. It was only when her strength was almost gone that she began to understand that she was not truly sinking. Her captor was doing what he could to keep her head above water. Except for an occasional wave rising higher than another, she was in little danger even of swallowing water if she relaxed and, for the present at least, trusted herself to him.

Once he was persuaded she meant to offer no more trouble, he led her a few paces forward to where, by standing on tiptoe, she had the reassurance of being able to reach the bottom and bear some of her own weight. Beyond that, he took no further notice of her.

She stole a glance up at his impassive face, baffled as to why he hadn't killed her yet—and what alternative he might

have in store. Was he, too, an acquaintance of hers? One, please God, of a slightly different stamp from Crooked Nose?

There was nothing particularly remarkable about his features, not enough so that she could penetrate the mask of paint that covered them. She judged he was a number of years older than Crooked Nose and perhaps twenty pounds heavier and better muscled. But that hardly singled him out, either, for Crooked Nose was far from being a splendid specimen of his race on any count.

Her eyes turned back to the scene on the beach. She did not want to witness any more of the carnage there, but it was impossible to look away. Rachel, where was she? What had become of her? Nowhere was there a flash of the bright green habit Rachel had been wearing.

And Virgil? She scanned the slope where he had last been, and where that first assault had taken its greatest toll. He must not be there. He could not be. So long as he survived, surely there was a chance for her.

But she was too far from the slope, the glare of sun on water too bright, her shivering from the chill lake too violent for her to identify any of the blue uniforms that lay sprawled at peculiar angles on and around the dune. That dune—this stretch of lake shore and the contour of sandy hills that rimmed it . . .

With sudden clarity, she recognized where she was. Just days ago she had been held prisoner by the arms of another man at almost this same point. But the man had been Joshua Stark—and oh, the difference!

Her Indian captor grunted, and placed a hand in the middle of her back, shoving her forward. Unprepared, she stumbled and lost her balance. He waited for her to get up, coughing and gasping. Again he set his hand between her shoulders, indicating firmly that she was to start walking back to shore.

Her body was a leaden weight inside her saturated clothes. Her joints were stiff from the cold. The more shallow the water grew, the more it cost her to draw one foot in front of the other. Rivulets ran from her hair, which had long since lost its pinnings and clung now to her face and shoulders like wet seaweed. Her teeth were chattering, and she could not seem to catch a full breath between spasms of shivers.

At first the heat of the sun-baked sand felt good through the

soles of her shoes when she reached the beach. Within minutes, her wet clothing was steaming under the August sun. Pain slashed at the shoulder where the tomahawk had grazed her. Giddiness hummed in her ears.

Now that she could use the support of a strong arm, even that of a foe, her captor seemed to feel there was no longer need to restrain her. When she faltered, he prodded her onward from behind, but that was all.

Dimly, she realized the firing had almost stopped. Indians were everywhere, on foot, on horseback, gesticulating, shouting, reveling in the spoils of victory. The crippled baggage wagon was ahead of her, its traces cut, its horses gone. A handful of warriors and squaws were tossing boxes from it and breaking them open to sort through the contents. Their excitement took no account of the dozen children from the fort still in the wagon, lying as they had been struck down by blows from some relentless hatchet.

Bethany staggered. She wanted to be sick but was too numb to retch. Here and there other whites were being goaded along like herself, some singly, some in twos and threes, some on foot, others slung across the backs of ponies that were being led by Indians. A narrow-chested brave was holding a pony's head while another Indian hoisted a bloodstained soldier onto its back.

The soldier raised his drooping head briefly, and Bethany saw his face. Her heart stopped, then thrust a desperate energy into her legs.

"Virgil!" she cried as she ran.

He made a terrible effort to straighten. His lips moved in a message she couldn't hear.

The Indian at the pony's head swung an arm at her. "You! No!"

He was Crooked Nose.

She swerved to dodge by him. Swift as a snake, he was ahead of her. His knife rose and drove itself to the hilt under Virgil's shoulder blade. Virgil's body contorted, relaxed, and with an agonizing slowness, slid to the ground like a discarded sack of corn. His body, the horse, the glistening lake, the dunes, all were eclipsed in the malicious triumph of Crooked Nose's grin.

Bethany had the queer sensation of knowing what it was

like to be a candle melting down into its own wax. She had no consciousness of fainting, but there she was in the coarse grass, her head in the sand. A pair of squaws were instantly upon her, tugging and tearing at the parts of her clothes they most fancied. A guttural word from her captor scattered the women, but each bore off with her one of Bethany's shoes.

He gestured to Bethany to get up. Dazedly she obeyed, being careful not to look toward the blue-coated body Crooked Nose and his friend had abandoned now that there was no longer life in it.

Her captor gave her a nudge. In her stockinged feet she began the dreary trudge back along the way she had ridden out this morning: back to the Potawatomi encampment on the bank of the river.

III. THE POTAWATOMI

Chapter XII

The wigwam was abuzz with flies. Bethany brushed at one that persisted in tangling itself in her hair above her ear. Her injured shoulder gave a warning twinge, and she slumped against the support pole behind her again.

Strange that anything so minor as a fly could be a distraction while the moans of Sergeant Jung continued their irregular cadence of shrills and gurgles a scant twenty yards from the wigwam door. She kept her eyes averted to avoid seeing him where he lay in the blaze of the afternoon sun, slowly and horribly dying.

Hours ago the Indians had carried him into their camp, badly wounded. An old woman had instantly snatched up a stable fork—perhaps the one the sergeant himself had been using only the day before—and with it had vented on him some private fury of her own. Not a hand had been lifted to stop her, nor had anyone so much as brought him a drink of water.

"They not going to hurt us. They going to take good care of us," Sally, the Healds' little maid, whispered into the pause between the ebb of one keening note and the slow rise of the next.

She sat cross-legged on a rush mat, hands folded tightly in her lap. Her eyes were huge, white-rimmed circles in a face that had a grayish cast beneath its dark tones. She looked a great deal younger than her fourteen years.

"They going to treat us kind," she repeated.

For her sake, Bethany quelled once more the hysteria nudging just below the surface of her fragile self-command. She made the expected response, which had become a refrain through the long day: "Of course, they will. They expect to sell us to the British for a nice reward, or to any traders who can pay the price. We're too valuable to be misused."

That was what they had been told by the corporal named

Thomas, who had been the third prisoner in the wigwam until his captor had come to claim him a few minutes ago. "We sent one of Kinzie's half-breed Frenchies to parley with them," Thomas had explained. "We had to, or be wiped out. There was scarce a third of our number left, less than thirty."

Lyle was among the survivors, he said. So were Lieutenant Helm and Captain Heald, although Sally had seen Mrs. Heald surrounded by Indians and led away on horseback after being brought down by several bullets through her arms.

"I'm sorry I can't say for sure about your husband, Mrs. Kimbrough," Corporal Thomas had said, passing a grimy hand across his face. "I know he took a ball in the thigh, but—"

"He's dead. I saw him killed."

Bethany had been able to say it without a tremor, like a stranger speaking of strangers. In part, it was because the impact of what had happened was still more than she could fully grasp. Her husband. She hadn't yet grown accustomed to thinking of herself as a wife or of him as a husband. There hadn't been time. Incredibly, she must accept that there never would be.

Sally claimed to have seen Rachel being marched away from the beach, captive but unhurt, at the time of the surrender. Bethany had cherished this small consolation until half an hour ago. That was when a sweating warrior had scattered the curious children away from the door and had stepped inside to survey the prisoners.

A pair of fresh scalps swung from his belt. One, a salt-and-pepper mix of brown and gray, was mercifully unfamiliar to Bethany. The other she recognized by its dangling black ribbon; it had belonged to Captain Welles, the gallant white chief of the Miamis, who had remained a faithful ally of the Americans to the end.

What appalled Bethany most, however, was the woman's bonnet set jauntily askew above the warrior's paint-smeared countenance. It was a green straw bonnet. Rachel's bonnet.

Of course, that did not have to mean Rachel was dead. He might simply have taken it from her without doing her any harm. Or he might have found it, an article lost in the melee as Bethany's own riding cap had been. There was no reason

to give up all hope yet, Bethany kept telling herself, but she had already seen too much today to be easily persuaded.

By grunts and gestures, the bonnet's new owner had ordered Corporal Thomas to his feet and prodded him from the wigwam. The corporal's attempt to speak a final word of encouragement to Bethany and Sally had earned him a cuff that sent him sprawling outside the door.

"How far they got to come to get us, those British that's going to buy us?" Sally asked.

"Ransom us," Bethany corrected. "Not buy us. They're going to pay the Indians to set us free. We're not going to be"—she checked herself on the point of saying "slaves," and changed the phrase to—"belong to them." For a moment, eagerness eclipsed the child's fear. "All of us? They'll set us all free? How far they got to come?"

Bethany brushed again at the annoying fly. A dozen more were swarming over the lip of a kettle that hung from the roof by a chain. Somehow, she couldn't bring herself to explain that what she meant by being set free was a return to the terms on which they had lived before becoming prisoners.

"There are British at Mackinac Island," she said, and remembered that it was Virgil who had told her. How close it had sounded when they thought Fort Dearborn could be in danger of a British attack! How far it seemed now—hundreds of miles, days of travel—when it meant a hope of rescue.

Perhaps a shadow of this thought had revealed itself in her voice, for Sally said, "There's traders can't be too far off. I'd rather get bought by a trader. Like that Mr. Stark. He gave me a real pretty ribbon."

"Did he? What did you have to do for it?" The question was out before Bethany had time to consider it.

Sally appeared to hear nothing offensive. She rubbed at a trickle of perspiration dampening her temple. "I showed him my mam's way to make a poultice. He knows some about simples, but he didn't know that way."

Mr. Stark knew a great many things, Bethany reflected, including when to take French leave of a place in time to save his own skin. It surprised her that her resentment of him could flare so hot even while she was fighting with every ounce of her strength to keep her terror for herself under

control. "I wouldn't count on Mr. Stark's help. I daresay he's farther off than the British now."

She was sorry as soon as she said it, for Sally drooped at once. "Yes, ma'am. I thought it was him went to fetch that Captain Welles to help us, but it look like he didn't come back with him."

"Mr. Stark?" Bethany's scorn sent a dart of fire through her shoulder as she straightened up incautiously. "Whatever made you think that?"

She never had an answer, for two squaws followed by three warriors pushed into the wigwam as she spoke. She clenched her nails into her palms to stay erect and impassive under their scrutiny. Whatever Sally had been about to say turned into a strangled cheep of fear.

The shorter and rounder squaw broke the brief silence with a mutter and a nod. She pointed at Sally and beckoned for her to stand.

"Miss Bethany!" Sally squeaked. Her hands fluttered in an aimless circle. Her eyes bulged as if she were being choked.

The squaw repeated her gesture, then reached and pulled the girl to her feet. Sally whimpered like a puppy and swayed. "Miss Bethany, they going to kill me?"

"Not kill," one of the warriors said. "This Wananang. Her daughter die of fever. You be her daughter now."

Sally blinked from him to the squaw. The squaw patted the girl's arm and smiled. Sally's smile was more like a parting of lips to gasp for breath, but she let herself be led out and away without further resistance.

Bethany suddenly felt more alone than she had all this long day. She scanned the faces of the remaining four Indians, and her hopes for herself sank like lead pellets. One of the men, the one regarding her most malevolently, was Crooked Nose. His appearance was no less vicious because of his ridiculous costume: a woman's lace-trimmed wrapper that covered him from neck to toe and a ruffled apron flung over his shoulders and tied under his chin like a cape.

He stepped forward, and with a quick motion, grasped a handful of Bethany's hair. Bethany shut her eyes, expecting in the next instant to feel the slash of a scalping knife, but a sharp word from the woman caused the fingers to relax their grip a trifle.

Bethany dared a glance at her. This was the same squaw who had been in and out of the wigwam a number of times during the day, helping herself to or replacing items in various hanging baskets and bags in a manner that suggested she lived here. For the most part she had ignored the three prisoners, not even deigning to notice Sally's request in limping Potawatomi for a drink of water. There was little in her aspect to choose between her and Crooked Nose so far as friendliness went, as she continued to speak her piece to him. Bethany struggled to rise at once in obedience to a sweep of the woman's arm that seemed to indicate Bethany was to retire to the farther side of the wigwam.

Crooked Nose set her down hard again with a cruel twist of the fingers still wound in the long, pale strands of her hair. Bethany could not help an outcry. But that pain was nothing to her torture as the woman darted forward, seized her injured arm, and yanked her to her feet while Crooked Nose tightened his hold on the hair. Bethany was seesawed between the two. They scolded at each other like a pair of fishwives, but she was in no condition to be astonished that such behavior could happen among Indians.

She was only hazily aware that it was the English-speaking Indian who came to her rescue. There was a note of authority in his deep voice that caused the squaw to let go and draw back a reluctant step. Crooked Nose disentangled his fingers from Bethany's hair with equally poor grace and spat out another flurry of angry words. He stood where he was, looming possessively above her. And quite capable, she knew, of dispatching her in a moment of pique—as he had Virgil.

The third man spoke. He sounded reasonable and—incredibly—amused. Whatever he said brought a derisive snort from Crooked Nose, but a nod of assent from the English speaker.

Other voices entered the discussion from the interested group of spectators who had been attracted to the doorway by the uproar inside. Crooked Nose glared sullenly around him, then thrust out his chest and proclaimed something that stirred his audience to grunts and chuckles of approval. When he left her side and strutted toward the door, Bethany's relief was so great that for a giddy space, sight, hearing, and pain were swallowed in a gray wool fog.

When her senses cleared, the three men were outside. The English speaker was spreading a blanket on the ground in front of the door while Crooked Nose postured and commented for the benefit of the ring of onlookers. Silhouetted now in profile against the light, the masking war paint less a distraction, there was something about the English speaker that stirred Bethany's memory.

Was he the laughing Indian who had wrestled her away from Crooked Nose during the battle and carried her beyond reach of stray bullets into the lake? Yes. Yes, she was sure of it, although she had been in such a state at the time that nearly every Indian had looked to her like every other.

The discovery brought a second shock of recognition. He was also the one called Little Hawk. He was a friend. She couldn't have told why she thought of him so, but it was a straw of sorts to cling to for a while.

The ring of men opened to let a panting youngster through. He handed a bowl to Crooked Nose, who immediately squatted down, gave the bowl an ostentatious shaking, and dumped its rattling contents onto the blanket with a flourish.

All heads bobbed forward to inspect the result. Little Hawk, squatting opposite Crooked Nose, scooped his pieces back into the bowl without a word and shook them in his turn.

It was a gambling game. Bethany had seen the game played before, or rather, she had seen part of it being played, for she had never had patience to stand by until the end. The pieces were bits of rounded bone painted on one side, and the object was to have them all land painted side up. Some games, she had learned, lasted the entire night. Most went on interminably, the bowl passing back and forth between the players and the pile of stakes—clothing, ornaments, weapons, or whatever—growing higher until a final lucky toss decreed the winner.

Bethany leaned her head against the pole behind her, but as quickly straightened up again. Her scalp still smarted where Crooked Nose had viciously jerked at her hair. It was a wonder handfuls hadn't come out by the roots. The cut in her shoulder was throbbing with renewed keenness, too. The tug-of-war had set it bleeding once more. She could feel a slippery dampness beginning to glue her clothes to the wound.

Awkwardly, with her left hand, she fumbled at the buttons

of her riding coat. Earlier, the chill of the lake had staunched the first bleeding and washed the blood away. She had kept the coat on even through the growing heat of the day, partly from modesty, more from a defiant pride that balked at surrendering any more of her dignity to her captors than was absolutely necessary. Now, though, it was important to separate the fabric from her skin while she still could.

The squaw was seated just inside the door, watching the gamblers. She turned her head at the sound of Bethany's movements. Bethany tilted her own head to shake her hair from her face and glared back at her. The woman regarded her as she might a rabbit waiting to be added to the cooking pot, without any particular emotion. Then her eyes came alive and she got to her feet.

Bethany divined her intention barely in time to clap her hand over Virgil's ring, her wedding ring, exposed now on its ribbon around her neck. The squaw's fingers clamped over hers and curled into claws, trying to peel Bethany's hand away.

"No you don't. No! It's mine." Bethany drove her elbow at her, and sprang up.

They were about the same height, but Bethany was younger by ten years and lighter by twenty pounds.

"A-a-ah!" The squaw jerked at the ribbon in hopes of breaking it.

Bethany drove an elbow into her again, this time with more force. For good measure, she jabbed her knee into the woman's belly. The squaw uttered a heavy grunt. She let go of the ribbon and crossed the wigwam to one of the baskets on the wall. When she faced Bethany again, it was with a knife in her hand.

Bethany darted to where the iron kettle hung in the center of the room. She caught the kettle by its handle and halfway lifted it free of its hook, dislodging a cloud of complaining flies.

"Stay where you are or I'll smash this in your face," she warned.

It didn't occur to her to wonder where she would get the strength for this. She knew the strength would be there. She had suffered enough as a passive prisoner. Her temper was up, and she intended to be passive no more.

The woman paused. Her expression was one of surprise rather than doubt. Her gaze took in the kettle, the chain, and Bethany in an unhurried, estimating glance. A shout from the men watching the gamblers broke her concentration. She and Bethany both swung around to see what was happening.

The bone pieces were scattered on the blanket in front of Little Hawk. He was setting down the empty bowl and smiling at Crooked Nose. All the pieces lay painted side up.

Crooked Nose raised his glowering eyes from the lucky toss, and scowled through the door at Bethany. His thin body tensed as if he might leap up and seize her despite his defeat. She stood transfixed, yearning to retreat to the darkest part of the wigwam, but frozen where she was as she read in his stare the reason for the game. At stake was her future—if she was to have one.

Crooked Nose grabbed the bowl and began scooping the pieces into it as Little Hawk started to rise. Little Hawk shook his head to this invitation to a second match. Standing, he shook his head again as Crooked Nose undid the apron-cloak from his shoulders and flung it onto the blanket to add to the stakes. Mocking comments, laughter, and wagging fingers were directed at the loser. Crooked Nose retrieved his apron, kicked the bowl and its pieces as far away as he could, and stalked out of the circle, bad temper showing in every line of his body.

Bethany was so caught up in the scene and its implications for her that she nearly forgot the squaw and the knife. But suddenly, without seeming to have made the least movement, the squaw was beside her. Bethany didn't even feel the quick slash of the knife as it cut the ribbon in two. But she did feel the heavy ring begin to slide downward toward her breast. Her unthinking response, to clutch at it with her right hand, was stopped midway by the spurt of pain in her shoulder.

The ring hit the stones of the shallow fire pit below the kettle and bounced into the ashes. In a triumphant swoop, the woman had it. She straightened and stepped back, and the ring vanished somewhere inside her grease-stained blue shirt as she turned to replace the knife in its basket. Her appearance was as bland as milk a moment later, when Little Hawk came in.

Little Hawk spoke a few words to her and sat down on one

of the mats on the floor without taking any notice of Bethany. The woman picked up a small kettle and disappeared outside.

Bethany felt her brief surge of angry strength ebbing. She retreated to the spot against the wall where she had spent most of the day. Fear of her fate still fluttered in her, but the struggle over the ring had drawn off her pent-up panic. She was not ready to accept total defeat. Not yet.

As unobtrusively as possible, she resumed the one-handed task of freeing herself of her coat, a button at a time. Little Hawk shifted on his mat and scratched his armpit. He didn't look toward her, but she had an impression that he was not so unaware of her presence as he seemed. She hesitated before working open the next button.

This time she caught the gleam of an eye rolled in her direction. Bethany glanced down at the gauze shift she wore beneath the coat and hesitated again. Uncomfortably, in his crude way she remembered that Little Hawk had expressed his admiration of her on that day when he and his friends paid the Page quarters a visit. Were all men—savage or civilized—cut from the same cloth? That is, she reflected, if any man could be said truly to be civilized.

The woman returned, her kettle full of water. She crumbled a cake of maple sugar into it, stirred the brew with her hand, and gave it to Little Hawk. He gulped it down with such obvious satisfaction that Bethany's other concerns shrank to a single sharp recollection that she had had nothing to eat or drink since early morning, an eternity ago.

The woman was being as careful as he to ignore Bethany until, without warning, a mutter and gesture from Little Hawk sent the woman sidling over to her. Bethany scrambled up, resolved that any further sparring should start on equal footing. The squaw spoke to her in a soft tone that might have been mistaken for friendliness, but Bethany sidestepped from under the hand stretched toward her injured shoulder.

"No!"

They repeated the soft words, reach, and sidestep twice more, edging around the wigwam's curved wall. The third time Bethany found her way barred by Little Hawk. His grip on her good shoulder halted her.

"Bebekwa medicine woman," he said, nodding at the

squaw. "She make good medicine. You not afraid. You brave woman."

Bethany slid a narrow look at the squaw, whose features once more wore that complacent rabbit-for-the-pot expression, revealing neither malice nor concern. It was an expression Bethany did not trust.

She dared not stare at Little Hawk hard enough to make out his expression through the paint. But his grip on her shoulder was gentle, and she saw that one finger was extended to where it touched a strand of her hair. He thought she was brave. He admired her.

She drew herself up with a haughty thrust of her chin. "Does she make medicine by stealing my ring?"

Little Hawk frowned and shook his head. He didn't understand.

"My ring. My wedding ring." Bethany sketched a circle around the base of a finger. "It was given to me by my husband. It's the sign that we are married. She took it from me." She pointed to the squaw, who showed even less comprehension than he.

Bethany repeated her explanation, adding to and exaggerating her gestures. At last a light of sorts dawned in the man's eyes. He spoke a short, harsh sentence to the woman. Her reply was bewildered, soft, plainly a denial of any knowledge of the matter.

"She has it inside her shirt." Bethany jabbed a finger at her.

Little Hawk's question this time was sharper than before. The woman clapped a hand to her mouth as if in astonishment, then searched beneath her shirt and, after a display of puzzled hunting, brought out the ring. Her voice, explaining, was innocent, aggrieved, sweetness itself.

Little Hawk rolled the ring on his palm while he listened. "This she find in the ashes. She not know how it came."

Bethany stifled the impulse to call the woman a liar. Best not to press her luck too far. "It's mine. It was on a ribbon."

"Aah." Little Hawk put it into her hand. "From your husband? The young man called Kimbrough. A brave man. He is dead."

"Yes." It surprised her that he should know so much about her; it disturbed her as well. She folded her fingers tightly

over the ring to assure herself that she couldn't possibly be here except by purest chance.

"You not fear. I am Little Hawk. You live in my lodge. You be sister to my woman. You find no harm."

What he said to the woman in Potawatomi must have been much the same thing. She bobbed her head and smiled at Bethany, a broad, warm smile that almost closed her eyes, and almost hid the cold challenge in them. For the flicker of an instant, Bethany saw Christiana gazing at her from under those heavy lids. But what this Christiana saw was not the childish innocent of Boston. Bethany had learned a few hard lessons in the months since.

Although it was the last thing on earth she felt inclined to do, under the approving eye of Little Hawk, Bethany smiled, too.

Chapter XIII

A gust of wind whipped the trailing hem of Bethany's skirt onto a raspberry bramble. She jerked herself free without turning to look back and without breaking the steady pace set by the Indian woman stalking ahead of her. A show of concern for anything so trivial as a torn hem would earn her a spate of mocking jabber if not a cuff from Fish Eye—her private name for Little Hawk's wife, a reference both to the predominant odor that clung to the woman's garments and hair, and to the cold, flat stare that recorded Bethany's every move from start to finish of each day.

Fish Eye came to a halt a few rods farther on where a bend in the trail led out of the woods and into the village. Her attention was apparently caught by something the trees still screened from Bethany.

Bethany used the moment to shift the load of firewood in her arms so as to ease the strain on her shoulder slightly. Little Hawk had not exaggerated his wife's skill with bark poultices and herb dressings. The shoulder was thoroughly healed now, leaving only a thin scar to mark where the wound had been, but it was tender yet, particularly on a day like this when there was an autumn rawness in the air.

Autumn . . . was it late September, early October, close to November? Touches of crimson and amber and gold were coloring the individual branches of the trees and a scattering of newly fallen leaves littered the trail, but Bethany had lost count of the eternity of days since her capture. She didn't even know where she was in relation to Fort Dearborn or any other point of civilized settlement.

Two days after the massacre, the Potawatomi camped on the Chicago River had separated into smaller bands and departed for their respective villages. Bethany along with three other prisoners—young Sally and two soldiers—had been transported by lakes, rivers, and portages to this cluster of

wigwams in the heart of the wilderness where she had been kept ever since. She and Sally. The two soldiers had vanished soon after their arrival here; no one had troubled to explain how or why.

Indians were not much for offering explanations anyway, she had discovered, except for making clear the sort of work they expected a woman to do. The general rule of thumb in respect to white captives seemed to be to make everything as hard and disagreeable as possible.

Fish Eye spoke abruptly over her shoulder and started forward. Neither woman understood the other's tongue, but the tone conveyed a command, and a sweep of her arm indicated the end of the village where Little Hawk's bark-covered lodge stood. Bethany gathered that she was being told to take the firewood home by herself.

She moved on obediently. A few minutes of freedom from Fish Eye's company were welcome whatever the reason. But curiosity slowed her steps as Fish Eye, herself unencumbered by anything but her hatchet, veered from the trail and set out at an increasing trot toward the river. There was a stir of some sort going on down there where two canoes were beached. A knot of people had collected and more were circling in for a closer view.

Bethany's heart did a skip as she glimpsed a flash of scarlet at the center of the crowd, a briefly upraised arm clad in a scarlet sleeve. Were these British just arrived? Officers and soldiers come to redeem white prisoners from the Potawatomi?

She was a good part of the way down the path Fish Eye had taken before a shifting of the onlookers showed her that the coat was indeed British, but that the man inside was Indian. She paused, then went on at a less hurried pace to where she saw Sally loitering at the outer fringe of the group.

"What is it? What's happening?"

"Remember them two soldiers, Carter and Jackson, that was with us? They"—Sally's chin indicated the man in the British coat and two other Indians who were unrolling a bolt of yard goods across one of the canoes—"traded them off to the English for all that treasure. They're bragging on how good they was treated and the presents they was give."

Besides the yard goods, there were muskets, blankets, and three splendid beaver hats. Not for the first time, Bethany

regretted she did not share Sally's facility, revealed through these weeks of captivity, for picking up the language spoken around her and making it her own. What were they telling one another, the people watching this unfolding of riches? Surely, the seemingly forgotten pledge to restore all the Fort Dearborn prisoners to white custody was freshening in their minds.

She scanned the assembled faces, knowing that Little Hawk would not be returned from fishing yet but wishing just the same that he might be here, listening and seeing.

The face she did encounter was that of Crooked Nose. He was running his tongue over his lips in appreciation of the canoe cargo. When his eyes chanced to meet Bethany's, the glare he focused on her held such venom that she drew back a step.

"That no-good Mota," Sally said, giving him his Indian name. "Look like he's reckoning up what price we'd bring. He just better call to mind I'm as Indian as him now. I don't need no ransoming."

Sally, as the adopted daughter of the woman who had claimed her, was taking to Indian life like a fish to water. She was free to come and go as she pleased in the village; she was learning the secrets of Indian medicine from her foster mother; she was not homesick for anything; and she was no longer in bondage to anyone. Little wonder, Bethany reflected, that Sally felt no panic rising higher in her with each day that passed without hope of rescue.

Fish Eye turned and spied Bethany. The scowl that accompanied her short command made a translation unnecessary, but Sally obliged, anyhow: "She say to go along. This don't concern you." She rolled her eyes at Bethany. "It don't concern her, neither. None of that fine stuff is hers."

Bethany compressed her lips and started away from the river with her head high. Strange how their positions were reversed, Sally's and hers. She was the slave now. Before she had gone half a dozen steps, she was jerked up short and nearly dropped her armload of wood. Laughter broke out around her, the loudest hoot coming from Crooked Nose, who had planted a heavy foot on the tail of her skirt.

Bethany felt herself going as red as the skirt. She waited in

rigid silence until he tired of his joke and lifted his dirty moccasin so she could move on.

Five steps more and she was staggered again. This time the foot pinned and released her in such quick succession that she was overbalanced by her own efforts to brace herself. She fell to her knees in a cascade of firewood, Fish Eye's jeering laugh shrill in her ears.

"She did that," Sally whispered, confirming what Bethany already knew. "But maybe you'd best not cross her. Maybe she's got witch powers."

Bethany scarcely heard as she rose to face Fish Eye. This was just the latest in a long line of petty tyrannies and abuse Fish Eye had inflicted on her, each a little less subtle and a little more vindictive. This was also the most blatant and humiliating.

Fish Eye flung her arm toward the tumbled firewood, indicating it should be gathered and carried off at once. Bethany stooped, snatched the straightest of the sticks, and hurled it at the squaw's feet. With another swoop, she collected her riding skirt into a graceful drape over her arm as its ample yardage was meant to be cared for when on foot, and marched away from the spectators by the canoes as swiftly as she could without running.

Incredibly, she reached the wigwam unchallenged. Inside, she rummaged out a knife from among Fish Eye's baskets, stripped off her habit, and grimly set to hacking and tearing away the excess length of a skirt designed to flow in concealing folds over the feet of a lady on horseback, not to drag along on the ground after one trudging endlessly to and fro on squaws' errands.

Had Little Hawk been present at the river, Fish Eye and Crooked Nose, too, would have kept their humor to themselves. Little Hawk had raised no objections to his wife's making a pack animal of Bethany for hauling wood and carrying water. Or demanding that she spend tedious hours grinding corn in a wooden bowl with a wooden pestle even before her shoulder was fully healed. These were labors he considered natural to women, activities beneath his notice. But he had brought Fish Eye up sharply on the one or two occasions when her many ways of injecting insult into her every dealing with Bethany had been not quite clever enough

to escape him. He was a man of honor, and he had given his word that his captive would be well treated.

Besides which, he had a liking for Bethany. His preference for her was, in fact, becoming daily more evident. Which, of course, Bethany reflected, driving the knife fiercely through the fabric, was the crux of the whole matter: the source of Fish Eye's mounting animosity and her own dread of being forced to remain here through the long, confining winter.

Perhaps she should have been less ready to smile when he looked at her, less attentive when he spoke, less willing to accept the small gifts that came from him. She had only wanted to show him she meant to create no trouble that might cause him to forget his pledge of safety for her until she could be restored to her own people. And the first few gifts had seemed mere common courtesies—a comb, a ribbon to bind up her hair, a cake of scented soap—all, she preferred to believe, items acquired by Captain Heald's distribution of stores rather than by pilfering the garrison's baggage. They were items as necessary, or nearly so, as the pair of broken moccasins Fish Eye had grudgingly bestowed on her when it became evident that Bethany's lack of shoes interfered with her usefulness on the forest trails and in the village cornfield.

But then, there was the fine, thick blanket she found in her sleeping place after the first night of frost; and the new moccasins, prettily beaded by some Potawatomi woman more artistic than Fish Eye, which Little Hawk had placed on the corner of the blanket yesterday. Fish Eye's deepening glower should have alerted her even if her own inner misgivings hadn't caused her to wonder if acceptance was altogether wise. But was it any more wise to offend a man who held the power of life and death over her?

Bethany seized her skirt in both hands and jerked at it in an attempt to rip the material apart between knife cuts. It was quality fabric, woven to withstand rough usage. Despite the daily wear and tear it had been subjected to since her capture, the material gave reluctantly. She slashed at it again with the knife.

The panting wheeze of Fish Eye, running, her bulk darkening the doorway, and her headlong pounce to wrench the knife from Bethany were almost simultaneous. Bethany had

time to scramble only halfway up from her knees before her wrist was being gripped and twisted.

Her left hand swung up hard. The smack of the slap rebounded off the birchbark walls. The sound was gratifying beyond any price Bethany could have to pay for it.

Fish Eye's head snapped sideways, but she recovered in an instant without loosening her hold. She clamped a second hand next to the first, twisting, squeezing in the opposite directions. Bethany felt the bones of her wrist grating together. She clenched her teeth in an effort not to yield, and clawed at the woman's circling fingers. But the knife dropped to the ground.

At once Bethany set her foot on it and heaved herself upright, dragging Fish Eye with her. Fish Eye lunged, trying to throw her off balance. Bethany braced herself and drove an elbow into the squaw's chest. Fish Eye closed with her, and they grappled like a pair of gladiators, using elbows, knees, nails, fists—kicking, pulling, scratching, swaying.

A rolling thrust of Fish Eye's whole weight sent Bethany staggering backward. The knife lay exposed. In one movement, Fish Eye dove for it and came up, the blade gleaming in her fist. She sprang for Bethany's face.

Before Bethany could do more than raise a shielding arm, she was gripped by the shoulder from behind and spun across the wigwam. She fell against the wall. Fish Eye went careening in the other direction, landing in a heap just short of the fire pit.

Little Hawk stood above them. He was not an unusually tall man, not nearly the height of Joshua Stark, but in this moment he towered.

He wielded a thick stick in one hand. That was what had toppled Fish Eye. He laid it across her shoulders twice more as she scuttled crabwise to get beyond his reach. Bethany caught the name Mota in the words that followed the blows, and wondered if someone had told him of the part Crooked Nose had played in all this.

In any case, it was clear that he would tolerate no more such scenes under his roof. Bethany cowered against the wall as he turned his glare on her. The direction of his eyes caused her to glance downward at herself. She had forgotten she was clad only in petticoats and clinging chemise. The chemise

was now in tatters, revealing long red scratches on the flesh beneath as further testimony to the sharpness of Fish Eye's nails.

Bethany could feel the sting of scratches on her face as well, but that was of secondary importance. She lurched for her skirt, lying in a heap where the scuffle had kicked it, and stretched farther to regain the coat top. Little Hawk watched in silence while she fumbled herself into the garments.

He bent abruptly and lifted the mutilated rag that had been the bottom of her skirt. "This. Why?"

"I cut it off. It was too long. It was in the way." She pulled the coat closed over her nearly bare breasts and began forcing buttons through buttonholes.

Little Hawk's gaze went from the ragged edge of her skirt to his wife crouching subdued beside her sleeping platform. When his attention returned to Bethany, there were deepening crinkles at the corners of his eyes that were not altogether in keeping with the sternness of his expression otherwise.

"You strong woman. Strong spirit," he said. "Not good for strong woman have no man, no babies."

"No! That is, yes, that is surely true. Or it would be, if . . ." Bethany was all too conscious of the new moccasins on her feet. They were tightening around her ankles like the cords of a snare. "When you take me to the English, there will be a husband for me there."

"You take Little Hawk. Little Hawk give you babies."

Careful, she warned herself. Go slow. Think. She knew only too well what folly it could be to reject a proud man's advances, particularly a proud man quick to anger. "But Little Hawk has a wife. A Potawatomi woman. I am not of your people, and your people do not like me. Your wife does not like me. There would be great unhappiness for us all."

"Room for two wives in Little Hawk's lodge. Room in plenty. The Potawatomi make you Potawatomi. Then no more trouble." A twitch of his shoulder indicated Fish Eye. "Bebekwa make no more trouble. Bebekwa's babies all dead. Strong baby make her happy. Make Little Hawk happy. All happy."

Bethany had a picture of Fish Eye rejoicing over her baby, Bethany's baby, usurping the entire care of it, teaching it to scorn its natural mother. And it would be a dark-skinned

baby, black haired with eyes like jet buttons, like the other babies Bethany saw strapped to cradleboards in the village or toddling naked after their mothers. Her baby would be given a name she would find hard to pronounce. It would learn to prattle in a tongue its mother couldn't understand. Monstrous! But more than monstrous to have to contemplate the bearing of such a child.

Virgil, Virgil, Virgil. Her fingers sought the ring that still hung on its mended ribbon around her neck. He had promised her honor and protection. Why had he let himself be killed instead?

"My husband was a brave man. It's too soon to forget him. I'm afraid it will take a long time." Time enough, God willing, for him to see greater profit in returning her to civilization than in waiting for her.

Little Hawk stooped above her and took the ring into his own hand.

"Dead man no good," he said after a deliberate examination of the ring. "No good for strong woman. Dead man no man."

He held the ring a moment longer, standing very close and looking intently at her. She wondered if he meant to stir her senses to an awareness of how potently alive and male he was.

She was aware, much as she did not want to be. Aware that his shoulders were thickly muscled, his naked chest hard and square; that the smell of him no longer repelled her as something uncouth and strange, that his breath was warm on her neck. Aware with a prickling of flesh like a shiver.

"Any woman who is chosen by Little Hawk is honored. There is always meat in his lodge, and his women never go hungry."

This was no empty compliment, for she had seen examples in the village of families reduced to the dependency of poor relations—namely the wife and children of Crooked Nose, who appeared endowed with an unusual amount of dependents. Not to mention a talent for laying aside other interests for the sake of gambling whenever there was a chance and for losing most of his current possessions whenever he did. Little Hawk, on the contrary, seldom returned empty-handed from

fishing or hunting. He could easily provide for a second wife and a lodge full of children.

"But I hadn't expected you would want me to stay here. Please, I need time to consider." She was fighting to sound composed and rational when what she really wanted to do was cry. "Perhaps you should consider, too. Those warriors who returned today got many fine things in exchange for their white prisoners."

Little Hawk shook his head. "Got plenty kettles, plenty blankets." He let the ring slide from his palm and fall back into its place in her bosom. "You think. Little Hawk wait."

But wait how long? He said no more on the subject that day, nor the next, nor the day after. But for three nights she lay tense in her blanket, on guard against every least rustle in the wigwam, scarcely daring to let her eyelids droop for more than a second for fear Little Hawk would interpret it as a sign her thinking was finished.

Rain pelted the village on the fourth day, turning to sleet by late afternoon. Bethany returned from filling the water kettle at the river, wet through and thoroughly chilled. Her glance swept the wigwam's interior immediately to locate Little Hawk and so to avoid going too near him. He had been seated on the sleeping platform when she left, fitting a new rawhide string to his bow, but now there was only Fish Eye working at the repair of a basket beside the fire.

And there was a mound of soft fur laid on Bethany's neatly folded blanket.

Bethany set the kettle down slowly as she stared. The fur was a robe of woven rabbit skins. She picked it up with hands that were clumsy from cold and shaky from dismay. It was a beautiful creation, silken and soft with a promise of delicious warmth. What a luxury it would be to wrap herself in it without fear of the consequences.

She smoothed it quickly into soft folds and laid it aside a short but definite distance from her blanket. Fish Eye continued to weave a length of cane in and out of the side of her basket, and took no notice. She did not look up even when Bethany stooped to the fire, holding out her hands to thaw them.

"What's wrong with you?" Bethany wanted to shout at her. "You don't want this to happen. I don't want it to

happen. We ought to be friends, not enemies. You ought to be helping me—advising me what to do!”

Fish Eye, however, had ignored Bethany's small peace overtures of the last few days, made with this plea in mind. Ever since Little Hawk's beating, the squaw had done her best to ignore Bethany altogether. This should have been a relief in contrast to the weeks of active hostility, but it served to impress on Bethany all the more how totally alone and alien she was in this wilderness.

That evening, the look Little Hawk divided between her and the discreetly rejected robe woke a flush of warmth in her. She retreated into the shadows as far as possible while he ate his supper. Her own appetite had fled. When it was the women's time to eat, she joined Fish Eye only because she hoped a few spoonfuls of steaming stew might offset the clammy damp of her garments that still had her shivering.

As soon as Little Hawk and Fish Eye, each in silence, retired to their respective places on the sleeping platform, Bethany shed her sodden clothes. Screening herself in her blanket, she spread the garments on mats near the fire to dry. The blanket was rough against her skin and slow to capture her body. Never had she felt more desolate. The hiss of sleet against the bark walls spoke of ice and isolation. She lay on her mat, listening, pretending to sleep—and thinking ever more vividly of the fur robe lying within reach of her hand in the darkness.

Why not? Just for an hour or so. She would sleep lightly if she did sleep, and could have it folded and back where it was long before daylight without anyone's being wise. She was so cold.

Moving quietly, she spread the robe over the blanket and curled down into a nest that was almost cozy. A sardonic voice whispered in her head through a growing mist of drowsiness: “You don't propose to perish of cold to save your honor?”

“I don't propose to perish while there's any chance to live,” she silently retorted. Had she spoken aloud or was it part of a dream, shouting at him? At Joshua? He intruded often into her dreams to say something spiteful, to laugh at her distress, to melt off into nothing when she was about to call to him. Except once when she was back in that upstairs

room of the tavern again and he was holding her while she turned and twisted, caressing her into submission . . .

The dream was so real. But she was dreaming, she had to be. His hand stroking her bare shoulder. Brushing downward to cup her breast. Brightened firelight red through her closed eyelids. Her nipples quickening, growing taut, alive to the drag of the blanket across them as it was pushed away.

She saw him through the slow lifting of her lashes. He had built up the fire, not a great deal but enough that she could distinguish the strong lines of his profile above her, the ruddy tones of his skin, and his naked body crouched beside her. She lay in a strange paralysis as he stroked her belly and thighs, pausing now and again to finger the gold that that united them.

It was his knee pressing hers apart, inserting itself between them, that shattered the last semblance of a dream. She had an impulse to scream. But it was too late for screaming as Little Hawk lowered himself onto and into her. It had always been too late, she realized, yielding with a dreary resignation. She was conscious of Fish Eye lying a few yards off, listening, perhaps watching. Hating her? Gloating? Excited?

Bethany steeled herself to remain passive, to keep silent, to—what? Resolution blurred as her body pulsed hotter under the demands being urged on it, and her terrible loneliness receded for a time to where, at last, she could not quell small whimpers and moans.

Chapter XIV

An inch of snow lay on the ground beneath trees barren of leaves when Bethany first suspected she might be pregnant. She was helping Fish Eye pack cakes of dried berries mixed with maple sugar, strings of dried pumpkin pieces and squash, and bark containers of cornmeal into bags woven of wood fiber to be stowed in the canoe that was about to carry them farther yet into the wilderness to Little Hawk's winter hunting camp. Fish Eye added a sack of pemmican to the pile.

The smoky smell of the meat, which had been cured over a slow fire, loomed up at Bethany all at once. She thought for an instant she would gag on it or else be suffocated. Her stomach contracted, driving a sour taste up into her mouth. A buzz started in her ears, blurring her vision.

Head bent, she clenched her teeth and held her breath until the nausea was conquered. Gradually the buzzing faded, and the too-familiar wigwam interior resumed solid form—the birchbark walls, the bent-pole framework, the wooden platform on which she now also slept as did Little Hawk and Fish Eye, raised above the drafts on the floor.

She discovered that Fish Eye was looking at her curiously. The Indian woman grunted a question.

Bethany shook her head. "No, it's nothing. Maybe a bad piece of meat I ate last night. I'm all right."

Fish Eye nodded. She left the pile of food supplies to rummage among the assortment of leather pouches in which she kept her medicinal herbs and barks. In no time, she had a brew of shriveled leaves and water bubbling in a small kettle over the fire. The sharp tang of mint breathed out of the rising steam.

Bethany kept at her task of packing, determined to prove to herself as much as to Fish Eye that her momentary giddiness was of no greater significance than she had said. It couldn't be. It was less than three weeks since her last monthly flow.

She was sure of that because it had come as such a welcome assurance that Little Hawk's desire to get her with child was not to be fulfilled yet.

As for the similar spell of giddiness that had churned her stomach briefly yesterday, that could be laid to disappointment. Bitter, bitter disappointment and frustration. For Little Hawk had returned from a journey of two days and a night bearing a new hunting knife and ax, an iron tripod from which to hang cooking pots, and several other provisions for his winter hunting. That meant there was a trader not so very far from here, that he had doubtless been in the vicinity all this while, unknown to her and her presence unsuspected by him. An American trader, too, for Little Hawk had grumbled that the man would not give him powder or shot for his gun.

And now that she did know how close rescue might have been, there was nothing she could do. By this time tomorrow she would be countless miles away; who could tell where or in which direction? A ripple of nausea crawled up in her throat again just to think of it.

Fish Eye poured a portion of the mint brew into a pewter cup, another souvenir of the massacre, and handed it to her. Bethany sipped from it, cautious not to burn her tongue but thankful for the quieting effect on her queasy interior. What other mysteries were tied up in those deerskin pouches, she wondered. Could Fish Eye perhaps concoct a potion that would rid a woman of a baby before it was born? Bethany had heard of such things. Dare she request help like that from Fish Eye—if there was a need?

Bethany gazed speculatively over the rim of the cup at the woman's broad back turned to her as Fish Eye squatted to resume stacking berry cakes. The transformation in Fish Eye since Little Hawk had assumed the right to share Bethany's blanket at will was hardly to be believed. It was as if, having been powerless to prevent the worst from happening, she had decided to make the best of it. The master-slave relationship between her and Bethany had mellowed to something more like instructor and pupil. There were times when she was almost friendly as just now, in brewing this mint tea. She hadn't even shown any jealousy when Little Hawk presented Bethany with a necklace of trade beads yesterday, strands of red and blue and yellow that would, in fact, have looked more

appropriate around Fish Eye's neck and were an uncomfortable contrast to the utilitarian gift he had brought Fish Eye: an iron spoon.

Bethany did not altogether trust this remarkable change of affairs. Yet, in a strange way, there was a growing communication between her and Fish Eye. More and more often they seemed able to grasp each other's thoughts, regardless of how unintelligible they found each other's words. That ought to be of some solace, especially if it was true that Bethany would need the special understanding of another woman in the months ahead. But perhaps it wasn't true.

She was feeling so well by the time she and Fish Eye carried the bundled household goods down to the waiting canoe that she was ready to believe her symptoms had been mostly imaginary. It was a wonder she hadn't worked herself into a worse state, her mind being so obsessed with that trader: how to find out where he was; how to get word to him that she was here; how to prevail on him to pay the price of her ransom.

She handed the last of the woven sacks to Fish Eye to stow aboard, then straightened to glance up and down the river that glided a cold, silver-gray between snow-powdered banks. In which direction did the trading post lie? Would they be passing anywhere near it today or tomorrow? If she were not with child now, chances were she would be before they passed this way again in the spring, and a child would put the final seal on her captivity. Little Hawk would never let her go then, the mother of his child. And if she were to escape, she could hardly take the baby home to Boston—a half-Indian bastard to be presented to Phillips Herbert as his grandchild?

"Miss Bethany, you hear what's happened?"

It was Sally, wearing a squirrel-lined cape and a French voyageur's red stocking cap. Her round face wore a pout of intense indignation.

Bethany could see nothing amiss near the canoe that Sally and her foster mother, Wananang, had been loading for departure. They and Wananang's husband would be spending the winter on the same hunting ground as Little Hawk's party.

"Because we're all family," Sally had explained to Bethany a few days ago. "Everybody's got their own family hunting ground just for them."

She had been vague as to exactly what the family ties were in this case, but Bethany thought she detected a resemblance to Little Hawk in the dignified openness of Wananang's countenance, in the pattern of laugh crinkles at the corners of her eyes. Also like Little Hawk, Bethany thought with a wry pang, the woman was fond of children. Right now she was smiling down at something being told her by a small boy clad in little more than a ragged old shirt despite the weather—one of Crooked Nose's children.

"Yes'm, them," Sally said, a jab of her chin underscoring the line of Bethany's gaze. "They comin' too. That no-good Mota and them. They not even kin, not close kin anyway, but they coming to use our winter hunting ground."

The glare the girl directed at the ragged boy was so plainly jealous that under different circumstances Bethany would have been tempted to laugh. Anything that threatened to diminish the distance she tried to keep between herself and Crooked Nose, however, was no laughing matter. He was always watching her when she was near, his eyes hooded, malicious, measuring. There were those in the village who jeered and poked fun at him, but to her he was no more comical than a snake coiling to strike. She made it a practice to stay out of his way as much as possible.

"But why?" A mild cramp squeezed and relaxed deep inside her; she shivered, although a minute ago it had crossed her mind that the sun was growing uncomfortably warm. "Didn't you say everyone had their own preserve?"

"To hunt in, you mean? Not him. Not that Mota." Sally's shoulders rolled in exquisite scorn. "He gambled his place away. He played that bones-in-the-bowl game one time too many and lost his hunting grounds. Now he's got to come whining and begging to other folks to take him along. Miss Bethany," she broke off. "You all right?"

Bethany was not all right. A second cramp, far more intense than the first, was wrenching at her just below her midsection. It was as much as she could do not to bend double with the pain.

"Something I ate, I think," she said weakly when the spasm passed. She drew her sleeve across the film of moisture on her forehead, and lowered her voice. "Sally, have you heard anything about that trader that's near here?"

"I'm going to visit the trading post come next spring," Sally said. "Wananang promised me. I could have gone this time, but I was scared he'd want to send me back to white folks. But she says no, he's a friend to Indians. All but that Mota. That no-good Mota . . ."

Bethany tried to listen to the tale of how Crooked Nose's habit of bearing off unpaid-for merchandise under his blanket had ended in the trader's forbidding him to enter the post again. But the details melted into one another and became only a murmuring sound. Next spring . . . Could she wait until next spring?

Suddenly she could not wait even until the end of the story. More cramps, one after another, were knotting and unknotting in her. She blurted something by way of excuse to Sally and fled up the bank to the woods. There, she barely had time to crouch behind an inadequate screen of leafless bushes before her bowels turned to water.

She emerged from the thicket feeling shaky and a touch light-headed, but reassured, too. This was no symptom of pregnancy. At least, Rachel and Margaret had never numbered it as one in their guarded discussions of the subject, although, granted, they had as little practical knowledge of the matter as Bethany.

She paused, collecting her strength, before trusting her legs to descend the slope to the river. Little Hawk had joined Fish Eye at the canoe. At a word and a gesture from Fish Eye, they both looked up toward Bethany. Little Hawk strode forward to meet her.

"Brave Woman not well?" His concern did not quite conceal an eagerness that lay just beneath. "Brave Woman get sick in morning two days now? Three?"

Bethany's instinct was to dash that hope at once, lest too much repetition make it a reality. Yet, if she were ill, if she gave the appearance of being truly sick, perhaps it would delay their departure for a day or two or more. And in that time, might she not somehow find a way of getting a message to the trader?

She let her head droop, her shoulders sag.

"If I could lie down for a while and rest—until tomorrow, or the next day?"

Little Hawk studied her, then the clustered wigwams of the

village, many of them already deserted for the winter, then the river. He shook his head. "Not lie down here. No meat, no food. River freeze soon."

He turned to Fish Eye, who had followed him a respectful two paces to the rear. She said something that smoothed the creases from above his eyes and woke a low chuckle in him as he surveyed Bethany's wilting form again.

"What does she say?" Bethany asked.

"She say weak belly make room for strong son."

Further protests of genuine illness were futile. Little Hawk's faith in Fish Eye's judgment was unshakable where matters of health and sickness were concerned. Within the hour, Bethany found herself kneeling amidships in the canoe, her rabbit-skin robe wrapped around her as protection against the cold. The trader, the village, and her impossible hopes were vanishing more absolutely with every thrust of Fish Eye's paddle.

Fish Eye had put a paddle into Bethany's hands, too, indicating that she was to do her share to keep the craft moving. Bethany quickly grasped the rhythm of lift, swing, and thrust, but her muscles as quickly tired from the unaccustomed demand on them. So quickly, in fact, that she would have been mortified by her increasing clumsiness, except that it served as added proof that she had not been well enough to start out today.

The truth was that she did not feel much better than she pretended. As the day wore on, she did not have to pretend at all. Waves of nausea rose and fell in her at uneven intervals. Twice, before the canoe was beached on the shore of a small lake where they were to camp for the night, she had to hang her head over the gunwale while her empty stomach retched in an effort to empty itself even more.

Fish Eye brewed more mint tea over the campfire, and again its effects were soothing. Bethany managed to eat one of the cakes of maple sugar and dried blueberries that Little Hawk urged on her. Afterwards she fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Breakfast for the three of them was a portion of the smoky pemmican that had undone her by its odor the day before. Bethany had little appetite for it, but to keep her strength up, she swallowed what Fish Eye gave her, willing herself to ignore the faintly bitter aftertaste. When without warning it

all came up in a rush less than half an hour later, she resigned herself to the inevitable. There was going to be a baby.

The second day was a repetition of the first. Sally, full of wry remarks about the behavior of Mota's children and of curious observations about the country through which they had been passing, came to crouch by her in the firelight that evening. But Bethany was so drained that she fell asleep to the sound of the girl's chatter.

Late afternoon of the third day brought them into a marsh, crunching through skim ice that shattered like glass ahead of the canoes. By that time, Bethany was lying on the bottom of Little Hawk's canoe, blankets under and over her, and it was as much as she could do to raise her head occasionally from the sack of cornmeal on which it was pillowed.

The dome shapes of wigwams danced into view as the canoes neared the farther shore, but through the veil of falling snow she could not distinguish whether they numbered four or two or six. Fish Eye, too, was exhibiting a disturbing tendency to waver between being a single hazy figure and two clear-cut identical women kneeling in identical positions wielding paddles in identical rhythm.

Bethany felt the nudge and bump of the canoe nosing up onto the bank and heard the grate of the other two canoes doing the same. The twin Fish Eyes jumped out and, merging again into one, pulled the bow securely onto the sloping shore. Close by, the voice of Crooked Nose was delivering an important-sounding declaration of which no one appeared to take notice.

Bethany sat upright slowly, fearful of setting off another of the attacks of nausea that swept her now almost as often as she lifted her head. She doubted she could climb out of the canoe unaided. The days without nourishment had taken an incredible toll of her strength. The wigwam toward which Little Hawk was striding stood on a rise that looked impossibly steep and a hundred miles distant.

She did not know if Little Hawk would be back to help her. In many ways no husband could be more considerate than he for her comfort, her welfare, her contentment. He was the gentlest of lovers, alert to what pleased her, open-handed in bestowing gifts—a mirror, a trio of copper bracelets—and so inordinately delighted by any small show of thoughtfulness

for him on her part that she was beginning to believe his affection for her went deeper than mere physical attraction. Nonetheless, she was still in the process of learning where the line lay between behavior fitting for a Potawatomi warrior and that which lay beneath his dignity.

"Miss Bethany?" Sally was leaning over her. "You want to lean on me, I'll get you in out of the weather."

A sturdy young arm slid under Bethany's shoulders and braced her up onto the bank. Fish Eye bustled forward, calling a sharp question as if she meant to interfere. Sally gave her a meekly respectful reply in Potawatomi that appeared to satisfy her. Fish Eye trotted on ahead of them, carrying an ax, the cooking kettle, and a bundle of blankets.

"Old witch woman," Sally muttered in an undertone that was neither meek nor respectful, but not altogether easy either. "Don't want nobody touching you but her. Like she's the only one knows how to tend to white folks. Miss Bethany, don't you go trusting her no farther than you can pitch a hay wagon. She got the smell of evil on her."

"An evil smell, anyway," Bethany said with a wispy gasp that any other time would have been a giggle. Even that slight effort unsettled the landscape, tilting the flat, reed-studded surface of the marsh skyward, dipping the rounded shapes of the wigwams crazily downward. She thought she should add in justice that Fish Eye was doing her best to concoct a medicine that would help, but that would have to wait for what breath she had to spare when she gained the wigwam.

Once there, she sank onto a bed of brittle old pine branches in a haze of exhaustion, too murky to gather her wits for more than a whispered, "Sally, thank you."

The haze thickened, thinned, and thickened around her. She watched Fish Eye bringing in wood and kindling a fire. Only it wasn't Fish Eye; it was Charles, Christiana's footman, poking up the blaze in the drawing room fireplace in the Herbert house on Beacon Hill.

Next it was Little Hawk, holding a bowl of something hot to her lips, and she was once more wrapped in her fur robe and blankets without knowing how it had happened. She did not want whatever was in the bowl. She didn't want anything in the way of food, but forced down two or three sips because the strong-lined brown face bent above her was so anxious.

Later, she was stumbling outside into moonlight bright on new snow, the cramps in her belly and bowels twisting like knives. Was this what every woman went through to produce a baby, she wondered in a lucid interval between retchings. Somehow she could not believe it was so. When she saw the dark glisten of blood melting into the snow when her spasms were spent, disbelief became fear.

She had only the vaguest memory of how she got back to her blankets, crawling because she lacked the strength to walk. I'm going to die, she thought. Dirty, ragged, sick, I'm going to die in shame and alone among savages.

Laughter. Someone was laughing. Christiana's silvery laugh. Christiana saying, "You wouldn't listen to me, sweetheart, would you? You had too much pride."

But it wasn't Christiana. It was Fish Eye hammering a pestle up and down in a wooden bowl, working something into a powder. Daylight was a painfully sharp glare through the smoke hole in the roof. Again Little Hawk squatted beside Bethany, urging the rim of the pewter cup against her lips. She rolled her head away, gagging on the heavy taste of maple sugar that assaulted her tongue.

"No. I can't."

"Not eat, get sicker. Baby not grow strong."

Bethany closed her eyes. Poor Little Hawk. He would be the one person who might be sorry if she died. But would his sorrow be for her loss or for the loss of the son he so craved?

His hand brushed her tangled hair back from her face in a gesture that was very like a caress. Slow tears of remorse welled in the corners of her eyes. Would it have been so terrible, after all, to bear this man a son? More than to bear one to Virgil Kimbrough who had wished it just as eagerly and who had been far less tender in his demands?

"Leave the cup," she whispered. "I'll try. Later."

It was a fraudulent promise. She watched the cup being set aside in the certain knowledge that even if she could have stomachached the thought of swallowing anything, she hadn't the strength to raise her hand for it. It was not an unpleasant sensation—the queer feeling she had of being light enough to float and at the same time too heavy to move—provided she could lie still enough to keep the nausea and cramps at bay.

She was hardly aware of Fish Eye's and Little Hawk's

hushed voices conferring beside her. Nor of Little Hawk's taking her ring. Comprehension jolted her to a feeble protest when she saw the ring pass from his hand to Fish Eye's waiting palm. "No—"

"Ring bad medicine," Little Hawk said. "Dead man spirit not want Little Hawk baby live."

Behind him, Fish Eye's face was smug, contemptuous. Bethany fought against the lethargy that bound her. Fish Eye was not going to win this easily.

Suddenly there was a pain, too swift and too explosive to define. Bethany's spine arched. Her knees jerked up hard against her chest. Her arms flailed outward. She was rolling, twitching, straining, choking, as convulsion after convulsion seized her. Her lungs gave up the struggle for air and went slack. She slid, gasping, into blessed, numbing darkness.

It was a shifting, uneven darkness, though. Pain pierced the numbness now and again. Voices penetrated the silence off and on. Images like dream fragments drifted in and out at odd intervals. She tried to sink deeper, to where these annoyances could not reach her, but she was roused sometimes by sounds of moaning that seemed to rise from inside her.

"Miss Bethany," another voice kept saying. "Miss Bethany, you hear me?" And once in a shrill whisper, "Miss Bethany, she's poisoning you. There's poison in that stuff she feeds you. Don't take nothing more from her. You hear?"

After that, angry voices, scolding voices, derisive voices—men's and women's—that jumbled together and faded into silence again.

Then the silence changed. It was not within Bethany but outside her, around her. It became a solid thing, curving into the shape of the interior of the wigwam, abandoned except for herself. She knew somehow, without bothering to think, that it had been that way for a long, long while.

Shadows and stillness closed around her. She was cold then, and the voice was moaning once more. A leering face materialized from the shadows. Crooked Nose.

Her blankets had been pulled away from her. She had the impression she lay stripped of her garments beneath his stare. His fingers kneaded her belly as if looking for evidence of the baby that was supposed to be there. The fingers prodded lower, probing rudely into her private parts. He delivered

cruel pinches to her thighs and plucked hairs from her here and there in a manner calculated to be as painful as possible. Her throat hurt from the cry he wrenched from her.

But he wasn't there after all. No one was there. She was alone, shivering, naked, too weak to call for help.

No, she was wrapped in her blankets, and there were faces above her. One face. Joshua—grim, taut, uncommunicative. She strained to speak his name, fearful he did not recognize her.

But the voice that spoke was Sally's. "I should of known when I seen her stripping that plum tree bark. My mam taught me those things. But I didn't think till I tasted from that cup she set out for Miss Bethany to drink, all doctored up with sugar. It like to tore my insides out afterward."

And the face was Sally's.

No, the face was Little Hawk's. And the voice was Fish Eye's. Jeering at Bethany, scolding her, shrieking.

Chapter XV

Log walls. Bethany's eyelids fluttered shut, then slowly lifted again.

It was true. She was lying in a log-walled room. The walls rose solid and four-square around her, not wavering, threatening to dissolve into mist.

She moved her head slightly and was aware that it rested on a pillow of sorts, soft material folded and padded. When had she last laid her head on a real pillow?

She was warm inside a sheath of blankets that was soaking in heat from a blazing fireplace close beside her. It was crudely built, but a real fireplace nonetheless, not merely a fire in the center of a stone-ringed pit in the middle of a wigwam. But where, then, was the wigwam. Where was she?

Fragments of a nightmare drifted into her mind. Journeying endlessly through a snowy wilderness, first in a canoe and then tied half-sitting, half-lying on a horse's back. All the while yearning to slip into darkness and never move again. Or had that been reality—and was this haven of logs and firelight the dream? She let the question go with a small sigh and drifted into a state of peacefulness in body and in spirit.

When she next opened her eyes, shadows were beginning to gather in the corners of the room. But it was still the same room, as substantial as before. Someone, a man, was stirring a pot that stood on a trivet on the hearth. She accepted his presence without surprise, as though a part of her had known for a long while that he was here. Yet when he turned so that the firelight fell full on the bold peaks and valleys of his face, an exclamation escaped her:

"You!" It was the faintest whisper of a sound, barely distinguishable from a breath. But he heard and came over at once to crouch beside her.

"Like the proverbial bad penny," he said. "Although it

strikes me that the appellation might apply equally well to you."

Joshua. She felt an urgent wish to touch him. To assure herself he was real. But the weight of the blankets kept her arms pressed limply at her sides.

"How . . . are you here?"

"This is my trading post. You've been here since yesterday, and you'll undoubtedly be here for quite a while to come. That's all you need to know for the moment. I have some broth here that's been waiting for you to wake up."

"No. Please." She turned her head away from the bowl he'd filled from the pot on the hearth and brought over to her.

"I can't."

"Try."

She lacked the strength to resist further. But the familiar whorls of giddiness began to warp the edges of her vision as he raised her to rest against his shoulder. The tip of a spoon eased itself between her lips. She swallowed automatically, then shut her eyes in anticipation of disaster.

The warm liquid slid down her throat smoothly, leaving a trace of saltiness on her tongue. It was a palatable change from the cloying sweetness of Fish Eye's concoctions. Bethany accepted a second spoonful, a third. She had swallowed almost half the bowl's contents before the old signals of distress stirred within her.

"No more," she whispered on a hasty gasp.

He set the bowl aside and lowered her to the pillow. "Go back to sleep then. My guess is you'll feel considerably improved next time you wake up."

If only she could keep the soup down, Bethany thought, so that she wouldn't disgust him and shame herself by soiling the blankets and floor, she would ask no more. The twinges within her were more like reminders of what had been than warnings of what was to be. Perhaps if she fixed her attention on the play of firelight and shadow on the low beams overhead, on the idea that she was safe inside log walls . . .

She fell asleep in mid-thought.

When she woke again, she was in darkness except for the glow of embers in the fireplace. But Joshua was at her side as soon as she stirred. He spooned more of the broth, still very

warm, into her. She went back to sleep without more than three words having passed between herself and him.

It became a pattern. Sleeping, waking, being tended promptly and without fuss, and sleeping again. She accepted it without question. It was enough for the present to be cared for and secure.

The threats of revolt in her stomach grew less acute each time she was fed, and she was able to swallow more of the broth at each session. Gradually, the periods she was awake became longer, and some of the overwhelming weariness began to clear from her mind. By the second evening, she was struggling to sit upright by herself.

Joshua placed a blanket-padded log at her back to bolster her, and she took bowl and spoon into her own hands. Slivers of stewed meat were swimming in the broth, and she discovered she was ravenous.

"Is there more?" she asked, when all too soon the spoon was scraping the bottom of the bowl.

Joshua cocked an eyebrow as he watched her consume the second helping in nearly as short order as the first. "I can see I may have made a miscalculation in paying powder and shot for you. If you intend to go on recovering at this rate, I'll be obliged to beg a return from Little Hawk to keep us in meat before the winter's out."

"You paid for me? Bought me away from Little Hawk?" She had grasped in a vague way that something of the sort must be the case, but now it was important to be sure.

"Two horns of powder, a sack of balls, and a Kentucky rifle that I rather prized myself. You ought to be flattered. I doubt he would have parted with you even for that princely ransom if I hadn't been able to persuade him there was no hope for you any other way." Joshua rubbed a reflective palm across his chin. "Not that I had to stretch the truth far on that score."

Bethany chewed the last fragment of meat and gazed down into the empty bowl. "I'm trying to remember. You were there . . . But how did you happen to find me?"

Joshua prodded a log deeper into the fire and settled himself on his haunches in the fireglow.

"Little Hawk turned up here one night saying there was a white woman sick in his lodge. Indian medicine wasn't doing

any good, and he thought I might know some white medicine that would help. That was the first I knew that Little Hawk's band was harboring any prisoners."

"And you had medicine." Somewhere hadn't she heard—long, long ago, a lifetime ago—that he had knowledge of simples and herbs?

"Nothing to the purpose in your case. The best medicine for you is to rest and take cautious nourishment till your system can mend the damage done. She was poisoning you, that woman of Little Hawk's. Bebekwa."

"Poisoning?" That, too, had the ring of something she had been told before. The bowl slipped sideways, unnoticed, from her lap as she stared at him. "She wouldn't dare. Little Hawk would . . ."

Joshua shrugged and turned one hand palm up. "Little Hawk has. He no longer has any woman in his lodge." As if to forestall further questions along that line, he went on without pausing: "The thanks go to that black girl, Sally. If she hadn't been quick enough to discover what was going on, and bold enough to denounce the squaw, the game would have been Bebekwa's. And probably nobody would be the wiser."

Bethany settled lower among her blankets with a small shiver. "And Sally's still there? Among those people?"

"She informed me that she is now a Potawatomi and has no desire to be anything else. No need to feel sorry for her. I daresay she's a great deal happier as an Indian than she was as a slave." He stood up, stretching and not troubling to hide a yawn. "Also, she's far from the first, male or female, black or white, to find Indian ways a lot more to her taste than our vaunted civilization. It's not so terrible a life."

Bethany shuddered again. "I hated it."

Joshua looked down at her contemplatively before his old, sardonic grin gleamed in the firelight. "As I recall, you tend to hate anything that doesn't start out as your own idea."

Weariness was beginning to drag at her. She could not find an appropriate retort. Besides, there was one thing more she wanted to know.

She averted her face from him and the fire, and spoke to the shadowy oblong of a blanket-hung doorway at the other end of the room:

"I think that I'm with child."

"You are not with child," he said, so emphatically that she flinched. In a modified tone, he amended, "It's not likely you are, anyway—if you're basing your suspicions on what that crone of Little Hawk's may have told you. The concoctions she was feeding you were calculated to give that impression, so that she could make them more potent little by little and no one would think to get alarmed until it was too late. She admitted as much to Little Hawk when he confronted her."

Fish Eye, little Hawk, Sally—Bethany sat trying to absorb it all, but the complications and implications were too many to grasp at once. The edges were blurred by the vividness of one central thought: the tie that could have held her captive more securely than any other—a child—had not been forged. She was free.

Joshua stooped to set aside the discarded spoon and bowl as she wilted, in spite of herself, into her blankets. She was conscious, as she had been before, of his hands adjusting the coverings around her. It crossed her mind that she had been bought by him and paid for. On what terms was she really to be free?

That reflection was still with her when she woke in the morning. It was an added spur toward recovery. Her strength, once it began to return, flowed back in a tide. She took advantage of Joshua's absence during the morning to test her legs. As soon as she was able, she was resolved to perform for herself the intimate details of self-care that he had been obliged to carry out for her.

A single, wavering step brought her down onto her blankets again. But a second effort, a little later, was more successful. That afternoon she achieved a full half-dozen steps, to where she could cling to the split log that served as a fireplace mantel, then manage the return journey. By then she had discovered that her sole garment was a man's cambric shirt, complete with ruffled front and lace, which reached to just below her knees. There was no evidence of her own clothes anywhere.

"I'm afraid it didn't occur to me to ask if you had a wardrobe to pack along. My major interest was to get you out

of there before Little Hawk had a change of heart and decided you should stay. So I bundled you up in a few blankets and what you happened to be wearing, which was a ragged petticoat affair that, frankly, was in no condition for anything but to be burned. And that's what I did with it."

Joshua's shrug indicated neither contrition nor great concern over the matter.

"You don't expect me to go through the winter in nothing but this?" she demanded from the folds of the blanket in which she had draped herself.

"You don't expect to, which is undoubtedly more to the point," he said dryly. "Well, there's an ample supply of cloth, needles and thread, and the like in the other room. Help yourself to whatever trade goods you need. In the meantime, I'll see what I can provide as a substitute for high fashion."

What he provided on the following day, when she declared herself well enough to be up and stay up, was a pair of red wool stockings, a voyageur's crimson sash, and a hunting shirt of linsey-woolsey as rough textured as it was sturdy and warm.

"Better wear that cambric shirt for a shift underneath," he advised, "or you'll likely be rubbed raw."

The cambric shirt was several sizes too large for her, but there was ample room for its surplus folds under the hunting shirt. That shirt, cut to hang loosely on a big man, enveloped her like a collapsed tent and all but immobilized her by sheer volume of material, until Joshua came to her rescue by helping to fold back the sleeves to where her hands could emerge. His grin became a chuckle before he finished. By the time Bethany got the sash cinched as snugly about her waist as she could, her legs encased in the stockings to which he added a pair of voyageur's red knit garters, and her feet tucked into a pair of moccasins that would allow for plentiful stuffing with straw to keep in the warmth, Bethany was laughing, too.

"Possibly not-quite the costume milady might choose for an evening's entertainment at Drury Lane, but serviceable," Joshua pronounced after a critical inspection. His gaze traced the curve of red-clad calf and ankle visible between the fringed hem of the shirt and the top of the moccasin. "And altogether fetching."

Fetching. The word flung her back to the stormy night he had applied that adjective to her garb of damp petticoats and a shawl. Was he anticipating the moment when he would assert his rights of ownership as her purchaser? All her desire to laugh suddenly fled.

She put her hands to her hair as an excuse to turn aside from him. "If you have a comb or a brush . . ."

He gave her both, and a mirror from his trading stock besides. After that, he did her the courtesy of attending to his own chores, leaving her to struggle unobserved with the matted skeins that illness and neglect had made of her hair.

It was a painstaking and painful job. She had always been so careful to comb her hair out every day and to keep it neatly bound up for the sake of cleanliness. And, perhaps, a little for vanity's sake, as Little Hawk had been fond of watching her do it. Now there were bits of leaves and even twigs woven into the snarls. But thank heaven, there seemed to be nothing crawling.

She heard the sound of Joshua's ax outside as she worked at a knotted tangle. Fetching, indeed! She gave the comb a futile tug that brought tears to her eyes. That was when she noticed a pair of shears lying on the fireplace shelf.

Her first impulse was merely to snip out one or two of the more hopeless tangles. Once she had the shears in hand, however, and began snipping, there proved to be more than one or two trouble spots. Many more. Also, the shears disclosed a tendency to cut larger portions than she'd intended. In short order, the mirror showed her a ragged disarray that looked as unkempt as the tangles. She stared hard at the image of herself and came to a decision.

Ten minutes later, all her hair lay on the floor except for a thatch a few inches long covering her head. Her scalp tingled from a vigorous brushing. She was contemplating the surprising result when Joshua walked in.

He stopped short at her defiant lift of a face framed in a pale aura of soft waves and tendrils of curl.

"There was nothing else I could do," she challenged his gathering scowl. "And it is my hair."

"Ridiculous to suppose, of course, that you might count it rare good fortune that you still have it in your possession."

She raised her head the higher for being a little appalled herself by the airy, lightweight feel of it. "Perhaps I count it rarer good fortune to have one possession I've been able to part with by my own choice."

He stood glaring at her. His expression was unreadable, but she refused to look away. At last he said: "You can set your mind to rest on that score. There will be no intrusions on your privacy, your person, or your bed while you're here except by your own choice and your express invitation."

He swung back to the door, but added before he let the hanging blanket drop between them: "But for God's sake don't throw that shorn hair in the fire. We'll be all winter getting rid of the stink."

As if she lacked the wit to know that! She rose to restore the shears to the shelf, but her irritation was tempered by a sense of having been freed of a burden that had been greater than the weight of her hair. Not that experience had given her cause to place much faith in Joshua's powers of self-denial. But if honor was not important to him, his pride was—and somehow she had managed to sting him there. Or was it that she had succeeded all too well in her bid to make herself unattractive?

The irrational twinge that accompanied this possibility lasted only a few moments. Hadn't she learned yet to value just being alive and whole and unmolested?

For whatever reason, Joshua proved as good as his word in the succeeding days. At first, in fact, he treated her with an icy correctness that was as discomfiting as overfamiliarity. But he found frequent excuses to be occupied outside, and she had free rein to amuse herself as she chose during his absences.

She spent some time browsing among the bales and barrels and shelves of goods in the trading room before selecting a length of blue broadcloth for herself. What sort of gown would result from her efforts, when she had no patterns to go by and not even an old dress to use as a guide, she would not venture to predict. But she was fairly sure she could turn the wool into something serviceable. If it wanted flair and elegance, so much the better. She would fashion herself a cap, too, she decided, from the tail of the cambric shirt. Not to

hide her cropped hair but to keep her head warm and herself healthy through the winter.

Yet, as Bethany was beginning to notice, this trading post promised to be remarkably tight against winter drafts. The building was actually two log cabins set wall-against-wall with a doorway cut through between them. The trading store was the northern side, a further buffer against storm winds for the snug living quarters; all the walls were well chinked and plastered with mud. Hard-packed earth floored the store section, but there was a real floor of puncheons in the living area. Both cabins had windows that let daylight in through deerskins that were scraped thin and stretched taut. Scornful though he was of civilization, Joshua Stark was not a man to deny himself all the creature comforts.

The cabin's meager furnishings—a chair, a bench that did double duty as a table, and a bed built into the angle of the room so that the wall logs formed the headboard and one side—were of a rough-and-ready construction not likely to be found in a Boston mansion even in the back kitchen. But they showed an attempt at smoothing and proportion that went beyond examples of similar furniture she had seen at Fort Dearborn. Books lined a shelf above the bed. They were ledgers—several of them—Bethany discovered by shamelessly kneeling in the center of the straw-filled mattress to take them down and peer inside.

The entries, done in a clean, bold hand, were of little interest to her: three smoked deerskins received from Nayonsay, Oct. 19, 1812; one ax head, two copper kettles, one copper brooch, three yards yellow ribbon, one plug tobacco on credit to Shaytee, Nov. 1, 1812; eight plew beaver received from Mota and White Bird; exchanged for one keg brandy.

Mota! Pages fluttered as Bethany reversed her gesture to flip the book shut. She studied the name again. Could that be Crooked Nose? And the other names . . . ? They were not exactly as she would have spelled them, but they were close enough in sound to names she had heard in Little Hawk's village. That must mean Joshua was the trader who, unknowingly and unknown to her, had been hardly more than two days travel from her all through her captivity.

What would he have done if he had known?

No need to ask that. When he did know, he had come at once, and he hadn't balked at the high price set on her for powder and firearms. He, who had refused to trade in those items! He, the man who earlier had ridden off without a word of good-bye and abandoned her to her fate at the fort. He, the man who scoffed at acts born of high principle or conscience.

How did you explain a man like that?

She shut the ledger and stood it up beside its fellows. Next to it was a smaller book titled *Lyrical Ballads*. She pulled it down and opened it at random, noting that the binding was worn and the pages dog-eared from handling.

*"One after one, by the horned moon,
(Listen, O stranger, to me!)
Each turned his face with a ghastly pang
And cursed me with his ee.
Four times fifty living men
With never a sigh or groan
With heavy thump, a lifeless whump,
They dropped down one by one . . ."*

Intrigued, Bethany read a little further, then paged backward to the beginning. "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" it was called.

After scanning the opening lines, she quit the bed and dragged the chair to the window where the light was better. She intended to read only a page or so, just enough to gather what the tale was about; then she'd restore the book to its place well before she could possibly be discovered prying into private corners.

But narrative poetry was a fascinating novelty to her. So far as she could recall, there had been no poetry whatever among the solemn volumes in her father's library. It went without saying that there were no narratives designed purely to entertain.

One page led to another. Bethany was deep into the trials of the thirsting "four times fifty" sailors when a voice intoned over her shoulder the very words she was reading:

*"Her lips are red, her looks are free,
Her locks are yellow as gold.
Her skin is white as leprosy—"*

"Oh!" She lurched from the chair and was on her feet, facing him in a single movement. But the terror that momentarily paralyzed her throat and shut off her breath went far beyond the guilt of being caught trespassing.

"—And she is far liker death than he," Joshua continued, mocking. Then he stopped, regarding her more intently.

"You are such a wit." She bit her lip to control its trembling. Not for the world would she have him guess how badly he had frightened her. She hadn't guessed herself how close below the surface panic still lurked in her.

"I haven't harmed your book." She puckered her face in a pout to foil the shrewdness of his blue eyes. "I was just curious to see what it was about."

"And you found it enjoyable, I trust?" The light mockery returned to his tone, and he let his glance drift upward to the log rafters:

*"The naked hulk alongside came,
The twain were playing dice.
The game is done, I won! I won!"
Quoth she and whistled thrice
A gust of wind stirr'd up behind . . ."*

He faltered on the next line, and his gaze returned to the book. Bethany handed it to him, and he settled into the chair, locating the verse almost at once and going on, reading aloud. His relish in the resonance of the words was obvious. He was undoubtedly reading to please himself, but he injected a vigor into the phrases that had escaped her stumblings over antique spellings and archaic wordings.

Bethany perched on the bench, listening at first as a means of regaining her composure. But she quickly came to a real appreciation of the tale and the performance.

"Don't stop there," she cried spontaneously when he shut the book without finishing the poem.

"Later. After supper if you like. I have some work I want to finish before dark." He laid the book on the windowsill. "Possibly you'll find some of the other ballads amusing, too."

He did read to her again that evening, and all the evenings

after that. The second evening he carried in a chair for her, newly chiseled from a large log, the bark still on it. It gave her a lower, more comfortable seat, with the back a single curved piece that shielded her from the colder part of the room while she sat sewing by the fire. Joshua lounged in the other chair, long legs stretched in front of him, the firelight on his book.

These quickly became the best hours of the day. Joshua treated her to samples of Shakespeare and Pope, as well as Coleridge and Wordsworth. Whenever she had a question or a comment, she was almost persuaded that he liked discussing these things as much as he did reading them. The stiffness left by their quarrel melted swiftly into a companionable ease, like the jogging of a pair of horses sharing a comfortable load.

Yet there was still an underlying tension dividing them. Joshua remained scrupulous in adhering to his vow not to invade her privacy. He was never guilty of a word or look that would not have been appropriate from a brother, if she'd had one. But perversely, little things—the inflection of his voice as he read certain passages, the glitter of snow in his hair when he came inside on a stormy day, the sound of his regular breathing only the width of the hearth away from her when she woke in the night—kept conspiring to remind her that he was not her brother.

It was wise she did remember, she counseled herself. Best not to be lulled into lowering her guard altogether. Except that the reminders grew keener each day, bringing a leap in her pulse, a tightening in her chest, or, worse, a totally unwarranted blush. It was of little use to recall the several real grievances she had against him. Their vividness had paled significantly.

The effect of these undercurrents was to keep her needle flying during the evenings and parts of the day. It also prompted her to clean and tidy up, and generally set the cabin to rights in a style that brought grumbles of grudging approval from Joshua when he found himself confronted by hot biscuits for supper, or freshly laundered linen. She was pleased to discover that her dressmaking skills were not as indifferent as she feared. The simple bodice and gathered skirt of her

gown would not be the height of fashion, but they did promise a more than passable fit each time she tried them on. She added a bow of the dress fabric to her cap, then yielded to an impulse to add a small ruffle besides. To be plainly dressed was one thing, but there was no call to go overboard about it.

"Very demure and proper," Joshua nodded when she set the finished cap on her head. "Although, I confess, I'm accustomed now to your shepherd-boy hairstyle. It has a *gamine* quality that suits you."

Whatever a *gamine* might be, his tone indicated she had altogether failed in making herself ugly—if that had been her purpose. Or was he laughing at her as usual? He could not have moved past her to take his powder horn from the bench more carelessly had she been a shepherd boy, every inch of her.

She gave a tug to the sash around her waist; it was forever loosening. "By tonight, I should have my dress done. There's just the hem left to put in."

"Then you'll be quite fine for Christmas, which happens to be tomorrow," he said, and slung his rifle across his arm. "I understand it's merely another day in Boston, but we prefer to mark it in a more festive manner in Virginia. I'll be back when I bring down something appropriate for a holiday pot."

Which was to say that he might be gone the whole day.

Bethany compressed her lips against the nervousness that always attacked her when she was alone and he not within calling distance, should there be need of him. But a happier thought seized her almost as soon as she heard the thud of the outer door closing behind him. With the whole day to herself, she could dare at last to have a bath instead of the quick sponge-offs modesty obliged her to settle for when he was near. She would be as dainty and clean as a daisy when she donned her new dress.

She wasted no time in getting preparations under way: the fire built up; two of the biggest kettles in the trading stock brought in and set on the hearth to heat; water poured into them by the bucketful from the hole Joshua kept chopped open in the ice of the river; the buffalo robe from his bed

spread on the hearth for a woolly rug; a blanket draped over the backs of the two chairs as a screen to contain the heat close to the hearth.

She doused her head first, scrubbing from her hair every lingering trace of Indian camp, smoke, cooking grease, illness. Then she folded the rest of herself into the water and soaked her entire body free of the past months, a luxury that was only a little diminished by the necessity of having to tuck her knees up under her chin to fit inside the kettle.

Afterward, Bethany sat curled on the buffalo robe, running her fingers through her damp hair. She marveled at how it responded to her pats and pushes and how it was already drying, unlike the day-long chore of tending newly washed long hair. The soft robe beneath her bare legs brushed a tingle of half-memory through her body, of sun-warmed grass against her skin, dune grass, a summer-lush willow thicket shutting out the rest of the world, a man's afternoon-rough cheek against her shoulder.

A moan of rising wind outside the cabin roused her to a sense that time was passing. Hardly a minute later, the door of the trading cabin banged, and the blanket covering the inner door billowed, admitting a swirl of chill air. Bethany sprang to her feet, snatching up the piece of sacking she had used for a towel just as Joshua stumbled in past the blanket. Three steps into the room he halted, brought to a standstill by the sight of her.

Bethany stared, too, for he was no less a spectacle to behold. Ice and frozen snow encased him from head to foot like a suit of armor. Icicles hung in a fringe from the edge of his cap, and there was a bluish pallor beneath his naturally swarthy skin.

"What is it? What happened?" she demanded.

"Went through the ice downriver. Damn fool. Not looking where I was going." His lips formed the words stiffly. "Got the deer—but wind shifted, temperature dropped . . ." He attempted a gesture that was curtailed by his rigid coat sleeve.

"Well, come over here to the fire, and get out of those things before you catch your death." Bethany let the towel fall and began struggling into the discarded linsey-woolsey shirt.

Joshua's eyes flashed sparks of appreciation, although his grin was barely more than a quiver in his chilled face. "My blood's warming nicely already."

"A hot bath will warm you even more." She dipped her hand into one of the kettles. "There's still plenty of water and it's still hot."

She built up the fire again to a roaring blaze while he stood thawing on the hearth. His hands were nearly too numb to hold the cup of brandy she filled for him from a cask among the trading stores. She undid the ties and buttons of his garments and helped him shed his clothes.

There was no way he could compress himself into the circumference of a single kettle. He compromised by sitting in one and soaking his feet in the other. Bethany sluiced dipperfuls of water over his shoulders and back and the matted hair on his chest, watching first how the bluish tint yielded to a ruddy glow, then how the water glistened on the contours of lean, firm muscle. The latent power in those muscles combined with the proof that he was also vulnerable as other men were, sent a tide of tenderness welling up in her that left her knees trembling.

She looked at him, the entire sinewy, taut length of him, as she had never dared to look before, when he gathered himself out of the kettles and stood to towel himself dry. He saw the look, and the towel faltered in its rubbing.

"Your shirt . . ." He stretched a hand toward where the oversized shirt, hastily cinched, was sliding away from her shoulder.

But it was the smooth skin of her shoulder his fingers closed on, not the coarse fabric. She could not tell if the sharp intake of breath she heard was his or hers, but every part of her was suddenly pulsingly alive.

"By God," he said in a croak that was scarcely more than a whisper. "I vowed I wouldn't. But either you take to your heels this instant or . . ."

Her hand closed over his and she lifted her face to him. Her other hand tugged open the loosened knot at her waist and let her sash fall where it would as he drew her against him.

Together, he and she sank onto the buffalo robe, oblivious

of its patches of dampness. Joshua's mouth was warm now and mobile, and for the first time ever, Bethany surrendered herself willingly and without reservation.

And for the first time ever, lovemaking was sweet beyond anything she had dreamed.

Chapter XVI

The wind shift and drop in temperature of the day before Christmas heralded the onset of winter in earnest. Snow fell and fell again. It obliterated waterways that were now frozen to iron and deepened around the walls of the trading post until it lay level with the windowsills. For all practical purposes, Bethany and Joshua were sealed into a private world restricted to the interior of the two cozy cabins.

It was just as well; there was no room for anyone else, Bethany reflected. She snuggled closer into the warm nest of Joshua's arms with the delicious knowledge that there was no reason to get up immediately and every reason to linger in bed an hour or two longer on chill mornings when a silvering of frost crisped the buffalo robe that covered them. Now that the barriers between them were down, it seemed they would never get their fill of each other. She, with the last tatters of shame flung away, was as insatiable as he. Even when they were up and dressed and involved in the necessary chores of cutting venison chunks into the stew pot and hauling in more wood for the fire, they could not keep their eyes from each other for any length of time. Nor their hands. Nor their bodies.

There were some quieter moments, of course. Many of these she employed in completing her wardrobe, fashioning a petticoat of a soft wool fabric and remodeling the cambric shirt until it fit her perfectly. Never had she felt more domestic or tranquil, and the feeling bubbled up now and again into spontaneous snatches of song—psalms, generally, for those were the songs she knew best. Joshua astonished her by joining in, blending a pleasant harmony in rich, deep tones.

He laughed at her surprise. "No man can be held responsible for the influences brought to bear on him during his tenderest years. Can you believe there was a time in my

misspent youth when I permitted family and friends to immerse me in total conformity!"

"I don't know a thing about your misspent youth or your family," Bethany said, instantly intrigued. "Except—" She was stopped by the jab of a memory she would rather have forgotten.

"Except . . . ?" he prompted. He looked up from the bench where he was cutting a thin strip from a deerhide to use in mending a snowshoe.

Bethany tried to appear absorbed in undoing a tangle in her thread, but his attention drew the answer from her. "That you were married once. And that"—her voice grew smaller—"you said you shot her."

"Did I?" His tone was mild. Too mild. "Ah, yes, now I remember. But as I recall, what I said was that she was killed by a ball from my pistol. There is a subtle difference, you may allow." The knife cut into the leather again, and the blade grated against the wood of the bench. "That's not to say, however, that I might not have gladly done the business myself had I been there."

Bethany adjusted the pad of leather she had tied to her finger in place of a thimble. She was not so ready to swallow his statements at face value as once she had been. He preferred to be seen as a man of crude passions and violence. But he had shown her of late that there were other layers beneath that rough shell: a capacity for tenderness and fun and for being touched to quick response by small tokens of caring that were freely given.

"Who did shoot her? Was it an accident?"

"That was the official ruling. A Virginia gentlewoman isn't expected to be that accurate in her aim, so it must have been accidental."

"Gentlewoman? A woman?"

"Her sister." The thin strip of leather curled away from the deerhide in a steady, lengthening string. "She took umbrage at finding her intended exactly where she had reason to suspect he might be: enjoying a degree of hospitality in my wife's boudoir that somewhat overstepped the bounds of common cordiality."

Bethany worked half a dozen tiny stitches more, ingesting this. It struck her that neither woman exactly embodied the

epitome of gentle breeding. "How did you come to marry her?"

"By trickery." The knife cut an instant longer. Then he flung it down and strode across the room. He stared at the opaque square of scraped hide that covered the window, his back to her. "She was master of every female trick since Mother Eve for beguiling a man into doing what she wanted, whether her current whim was to spite her sister or, as in my case, to acquire property and connections she coveted. After three years of adventures abroad in the name of education, I was still fool enough to be maneuvered into the appearance of having compromised her and to presume myself therefore obliged to offer marriage."

Bethany studied the rigid stance of his legs and set of his shoulders with a brief sympathy. Suddenly she was angry on her own behalf. If she knew him, he had not been wholly guiltless in spirit, if not in fact, of compromising the girl. His personal honor hadn't been seriously damaged, however; some might even view the manner of his wife's death as an excuse for his earlier indiscretion with Bethany. He could almost surely end his self-imposed exile and return to his old home and old life any day he chose.

Not so for Bethany Herbert Kimbrough Little Hawk—sometime companion of Joshua Stark.

She drove her needle deep into the seam edge and let the material fall to the floor. "You were beguiled, at least. I didn't find my experiences in that area anywhere near so entertaining."

"Your experiences?" He swung around slowly, his black scowl yielding to the impudent grin that was always so provoking. "You refer to your British major acquaintance, I presume. Assuredly not to me."

Bethany pulled his heavy winter cloak from the wall peg and proceeded to wrap herself in it without responding. All at once she had an overwhelming need to breathe fresh, cold, clean air.

His voice followed her to the door: "If it's any consolation to you, I didn't know that night I took you that there'd been no one else. By the time the error was evident, it was too late to undo what was done."

How could there be anything consoling in that, Bethany

wondered. She pulled the outer door shut behind her and blinked in the dazzle of boundless snow that confronted her. No halfway apology or confession could alter the fact of what had been done. It changed nothing.

And yet, a tight core of bitterness that had persisted through even these recent, tender days began to dissolve. In some way, she felt vindicated, cleansed of a brand that had never been deserved.

The snow lay too deep for her to wander anywhere except in the paths worn by Joshua to the woodpile, the river, the lean-to stable that housed a rough-coated gray horse possessing more stamina than beauty.

It didn't matter. Pacing to and fro did just as well for the exercise she wanted; the sharp air cut away the cobwebs that had so long grayed her opinion of herself.

When Joshua came into the stable behind her and laid tentative hands on her shoulders, she tipped her head back against him. She turned her cheek to meet the press of his, a communication without words that had become ever more natural. And that now sent them hurrying from the stable and up the path to the cabin.

Bethany drifted off to sleep that night as relaxed and tranquil as she had ever been. Two hours later she woke sobbing in terror from a nightmare in which she was in the thick of the massacre again, struggling vainly to lift a blue-coated body she knew to be Virgil. Striving to reach an elusive Rachel, who emerged from wreaths of gunsmoke to vanish beyond a turmoil of plunging horses, kicking despairingly for air in icy water over her head. It was a long while before she could stop trembling, even with the reassurance of Joshua's arms holding her close and his voice soothing her.

He had questioned her very little about the massacre, and she had had no desire to speak of it, much less remember. But now as she sobbed out fragments of her dream, he drew her out bit by bit until the whole story, in all its terrible detail, spilled from her.

Joshua was a good listener, ready with comment or question to keep the talk flowing whenever there was a pause, but never aggressively probing for more at a time than she could bear to tell.

It was a long night, ending at last with his lips brushing her

cheek, tracing the line of her neck, moving over her shoulders, and lingering at the hollow of her throat until she forgot the grim shades of the past in the encompassing glow of the present.

There were other nightmares on other nights, in which Fish Eye and Crooked Nose and scenes of Indian life figured as well as jumbled episodes of the fort routine and the massacre. Curiously, no such dreams had troubled her directly after the event or during the months of her captivity. It was as if her memory had kept the images locked away until her waking hours were grown bright and secure enough for her to dare to relax her guard.

"Oh, don't! Please, don't look like that," she gasped, from the midst of the snowbank in which her first assay at snowshoeing had upended her. "I feel so guilty when I think of Rachel and Margaret, where they might be now and what could be happening to them. And here I am with you—laughing!"

"Would it change where they are or what is happening if you were doing something else?" Joshua abandoned his grinning contemplation of her floundering to untangle herself, and pulled her to her feet. "That's your Puritan conscience talking, not common sense. Always at the ready to accuse itself of blame, no matter what. Except," he added, stooping to align her snowshoes for her, "when that is where the blame actually lies."

Bethany shook a cascade of snow from her skirt. "I think of Virgil, too." The disquieting truth was that she'd given Virgil very little thought since her widowhood. She could not call his face to mind clearly even in her dreams—an infidelity that was the more damning because through her mittened hand, resting for support on Joshua's bent shoulder, she was alive to every detail of this man's body from the narrow, neat sole of his foot to the unruly black cowlick at the crown of his head.

"Virgil was a young man of high principles, higher self-esteem, and no imagination. A combination that was bound to get him killed sooner or later in his profession—and to make your life thoroughly miserable in the interim. I don't see that you owe him anything."

Joshua gave a final tug to the set of her straw-packed

moccasin on her left snowshoe and straightened up. "In fact, if it hadn't been for him and his damned respectability you so covet, you might have been well away from Fort Dearborn before all hell broke loose. I don't know why I didn't tie you to your horse that day at the lake shore and keep on going until we got here. It would have spared us both a great deal of inconvenience later. Now, then—lift your feet. Don't shuffle. High. Like this."

His share of inconvenience, she supposed, was his trek to Little Hawk's camp to get her, and the bother of nursing her back to health after. But as she strove to lift her feet in the manner bidden and fought down a new attack of giggles at her own awkwardness, a random fragment of memory nudged her.

"Where were you when—when all hell broke loose?"

"Camped in the middle of nowhere," he said shortly. "Tending a lame horse with no way to get another." He strode on past her, the stubby tails of the clumsy, round snowshoes kicking up sprays of powdery snow in his wake. "Now watch. Stretch your legs double what you usually do and keep your feet apart."

She watched and stretched and accomplished half a dozen spread-legged steps before she had to catch at a convenient sapling to avoid pitching headlong. The squeak of dry snow, the rasp of a chickadee, the creak of leather thongs, heightened the forest stillness to a thing she could almost touch as she gathered her breath.

"Sally told me it was you that carried word to Captain Welles and his Miamis that we were in trouble. That's why you left the fort so suddenly."

Joshua flung a sardonic laugh over his shoulder. "I'd hardly boast of it if it were true, since Captain Welles's ride to the rescue profited no one except the Potawatomi who got his scalp. I trust you were quick to inform her that my character partakes more of the rat leaving the sinking ship than of noble purpose and selfless deeds."

And that was as much of an answer as she would ever have from him, she knew. She might make of it what she pleased. Once there would have been no question but to believe the worst of him; she had not wanted to grant he could be capable of anything less.

But what she wanted to believe today was altogether different. "Fraud!" she challenged him, launching herself onward again.

Three wild, hopping strides landed her on the tail of his snowshoe as he was on the point of swinging it forward. He swayed and went down on one knee. Bethany collapsed on top of him, only partly through design, and the snowshoeing lesson for that day ended with them rolling and wrestling in the snow and laughing like a pair of children.

The cold and thoughts of dinner drove them back to the cabin at last. There the fun went out of Bethany the instant she stepped inside. An Indian in a dark red blanket sat on the bearskin that served as a rug in front of the fire.

Bethany's dismay must have betrayed itself, for Joshua gave her arm a warning pressure. "Go on along. It's all right. Just business."

He did not have to urge her twice. She slipped behind the counter and on to the inner door as he advanced to greet the newcomer.

Her mind told her that her instinct to run and hide was nonsense. The Indian was not Little Hawk or any man from his village. Furthermore, Little Hawk was a man of honor; he would not renege on the bargain he and Joshua had struck.

But while the facts marshalled themselves in her brain, the rest of her continued to quake with a dread that was outside the pale of reason. She tiptoed as far as the chair Joshua usually occupied and stood gripping its back, listening for any ominous change of tone in the voices that filtered through from the other room.

"You'll get used to it," Joshua assured her after the Indian was gone. "They'll be dropping in more and more often as we get on toward spring. You're here through a legitimate transaction agreed to by all parties concerned. They know it or will before many more months go by. Nobody can hold a candle to Indians for spreading gossip."

"But they're still on the side of the British," Bethany objected. "And I'm still an American. So are you. And the war isn't over yet, is it?"

"No, not that I've heard." He frowned at the steam rising from the kettle of corn stew she was industriously and unnecessarily stirring to atone for her earlier neglect of it. "This is

a trading post, though, not a fort. I'm known to deal fairly and to be openhanded when gifts are appropriate. I count a good share of the people around here as friends—and none, so far as I know, are outright enemies."

As the winter wore on, Bethany did grow used to the post's occasional visitors after a fashion. She saw for herself that these Indians held Joshua in great respect. Some solitary ones seemed to come merely to talk with him, for they appeared to bring nothing to trade, although Joshua never sent them away empty-handed.

Once a man laid a blanketed bundle on the hearth in the trading room and unwrapped it to reveal a fever-wasted youngster of no more than two. Bethany helped Joshua spoon life-saving decoctions of Peruvian bark into the baby's mouth and prepared meals for both the child and father during the three days they remained camped in the trading room. But she could never quite conquer the foreboding that set every nerve in her body throbbing with the impulse to run and hide each time another Indian arrived.

Aside from these qualms, however, she would not have exchanged a day or a night of this winter in the cramped living quarters of this wilderness trading post for an eternity in a sumptuous palace. Returning from a visit to the gray horse in the stable where she had lingered until she saw a red-blanketed Indian—the same one who had alarmed her that first day—mount a waiting pony and ride off, Bethany was startled to realize how much the snowbanks in the clearing had compacted and shrunk. They were crusted over, hard as stale cake, pockmarked under the eaves of the cabin where glittering icicles were funneling a steady drip, drip under the mellowing rays of the sun.

"Don't depend on it until you hear geese flying over," Joshua greeted her announcement that spring was nearly here. He rumbled her hair up from the back of her neck as she pulled off her mittens and cloak and dropped them on the bed. "I do have a piece of information that may please you. Your friends the Pages are in good health and together with the Americans at Fort Wayne. I don't know how he got there, but she spent most of the winter there after a trader on the Wabash ransomed her."

"You've heard from them? How do you know?"

"I've heard of them. I told you Indians are inveterate gossips, and I let it be known round about that there were certain things I would be interested in learning." His eyes were blue sparks of amusement in appreciation of her surprise. "Also, Lieutenant Helm and his wife are in British hands, and have been for some time. So you can stop having nightmares about them all."

Bethany gazed at him, absorbing not only the welcome information, but the fact that he had gone to the trouble of searching it out for her. It might yet be a mistake to speak the words that sprang to her lips. She rose on tiptoe to fling her arms around him and kiss him instead.

"Joshua, thank you."

"I'll exact payment, never fear," he said, and assumed brief command of the kiss before releasing her.

A sheet of folded paper fell past her to the floor.

"What's that? Not a letter?"

She pounced to pick it up, but his long arm was quicker. "No, not a letter. Nothing of concern to you."

He turned from her slightly, unfolding the sheet, and ran his eye over the contents as if to fix them in his mind. Then he tossed the paper into the fire.

Bethany did not question him. She was beginning to be sure she had a secret of her own. Of course, she had been misled into thinking so twice before, once through a malicious trick and once through fear. She was a little frightened now, too, but not in the same way, not with the same fear.

What was Joshua's reaction going to be when she told him? Would he be pleased? Or angry? Or retreat into cynical indifference? When would it be best to tell him? And how?

She lay awake in the darkness, pondering alternatives a good while after Joshua's breathing beside her was deep and even. The result was she slept lightly, uneasily, and woke earlier than usual in the morning.

Joshua was still asleep. She studied his profile from the corner of her eye, seeking a guiding clue in the black brows, the thick lashes, the softened curve of his mouth in repose, the stern chin line that never compromised.

When he stirred somewhat, she looked away, not ready to answer the questions he might ask if he woke under her stare.

She slipped out of bed and began quietly dressing in the thin light that was seeping through the cracks in the shutters.

She was prodding the banked fire back to life when a prickle tightened the skin of her neck. Had she heard a whisper of sound from the trading room? As she turned, the blanket over the doorway was flipped aside. On the instant, she was hurled into the midst of her worst nightmare.

Her scream brought Joshua from the bed in a bound. The shadowy figure of the Indian in the doorway leaped for him, hatchet upraised. Joshua dodged the blow and wrenched the poker from Bethany's hand. As he swung it, a second shadow glided in past the first. There was the *thunk* of a tomahawk striking a skull. Joshua went down, his tall frame sprawled full length on the floor. He did not move again.

Bethany heard her screams as something apart from herself, the voice of someone else. She ran to kneel beside Joshua, but rough hands dragged her to her feet and pulled her away.

The fire she had been tending caught hold and flared up around the fresh kindling. In the strengthening light, she saw the face of her captor leering above her. Crooked Nose.

She had no need to ask what fate was to be hers. He was already fumbling at her skirts, bundling them upward. The bulge of his intention was plainly visible through the loincloth he wore.

Bethany fought him with nails and teeth and knees. He let go of her long enough to deliver a blow behind her ear that snapped her head sideways. She slid downward into darkness. The last thing she saw was Joshua's inert body, and the bright blood flowing over his naked shoulder and into a spreading pool on the floor.

IV. DETROIT

Chapter XVII

Fat, wet flakes of snow were falling. They splashed down Bethany's cheeks like tears and soaked into her garments like rain, but she took no particular notice other than to bend her head a little lower to better keep her wet, chilled feet from straying off the trail in the thickening misty whiteness. She was long past heeding such minor discomforts as wetness and cold.

It seemed forever that she had been plodding along this snow-filled trail under dripping, barren trees or across drifted natural clearings that repeated themselves endlessly day after day. When she had regained consciousness after Crooked Nose's blow to quiet her in the cabin, it had been to find herself trussed up in a blanket and flung across the back of a horse like a bale of goods and with a soreness and ache between her legs that told her she had been spared nothing while her mind had been mercifully blank.

As soon as Crooked Nose and his companion saw she was awake, they pulled her from the horse—Joshua's gray horse—and untied her so she could walk. They loaded her down with a portion of their plunder from the trading post and prodded her onward, not at all gently. She had been walking ever since.

Days . . . weeks? She didn't know anymore, nor did she care.

But the days of plodding were better than the nights in camp beside the trail. Rarely was she allowed to pass a night without her tired body being violated by one man or the other. More often she was used by both. Crooked Nose especially would not leave her alone. She had learned to clench her teeth against any cry or wince of pain, for the knowledge that he was hurting her always prolonged his assault and doubled its brutality. Yet, for the most part, her senses were still mercifully dulled by shock.

She endured the nights and moved on through the days with a dumb compliance much like that of the horse plodding alongside her. It was only when she closed her eyes and, without warning, saw again the indelible horror etched inside her lids—Joshua maimed, bleeding, dead—only then did she come fully alive in every screaming nerve. Nothing she suffered was worse than that.

She stumbled on a frozen clod hidden under the snow. Crooked Nose turned and gave her a vicious poke with his rifle. It was the same rifle Joshua had carried the day he went out to kill a deer for Christmas dinner.

Bethany fixed her eyes more resolutely on her footing and willed the familiar cloud to shroud her mind to anything else.

There were more clods under the snow. A few yards on, some lay partly exposed, not quite covered yet and not yet frozen, either. Horse droppings. That's what they were. Horses had traveled this trail ahead of her, and some not so very long ago.

She raised her head, making an effort for the first time in days to take stock of her surroundings. Somewhere, somehow, in the hours she had been trudging stolidly onward since early morning, the trail had left the forest depths and become a tree-lined road that bore the marks of sled runners and ruts cut by wheels.

There beyond the trees was a stretch of cleared land. That was a house, that oblong shape obscured by snow haze. Not a bark wigwam but a real house. Was she then being brought to a settlement at last? A tiny flutter came and went in the middle of her heartbeat.

Within another mile, there could be no question about it. A white settlement had to be close at hand. She counted four more houses set well back from the road amid fields that bore the signs of being well cultivated. In one yard, a trio of boys in red stocking caps pelted each other with snowballs beside a rounded haystack. The sight of two Indians, a horse, and a white woman shuffling by on the road caused barely a pause in their game. Apparently the small procession presented nothing out of the ordinary in the boy's experience.

A broad, frozen river bordered the other side of the road. It looked to her much as the Chicago River might at this season.

Was it possible her captors were leading her back to Fort Dearborn?

On rounding the next bend, she had a dizzy instant of being almost sure that that was where she was. Ahead of her rose a wall of log palisades such as had enclosed Fort Dearborn, its wide gates standing open to the road.

But Fort Dearborn had been burned to the ground—one of the last acts the victorious Indians had committed before departing for their various villages. Also, these palisades were more extensive and considerably more weathered than those of the Chicago fort. And the sentries who emerged from the shelter of the blockhouse to challenge her companions were garbed in scarlet coats.

Bethany cast a glance of appeal at the nearest soldier as Crooked Nose led the way past him.

"Please," she asked as low as she could and still hope to be heard, "what place is this?"

Crooked Nose's partner gave her a cuff that sent her staggering. His growl needed no translation to make it plain she was not to so forget herself again.

The sentry she had addressed stared above and beyond her in stony silence. The other sentry, just a hint of compassion in his voice, muttered to his musket: "Detroit, ma'am."

Bethany trudged on, head bent, as though she had not heard.

Detroit. She and Lyle and Rachel had disembarked at Detroit to stretch their legs midway on the long water voyage west to Fort Dearborn. Detroit, in her memory, was an American town. A town fragrant with lilacs and green with the fullness of spring.

She scrutinized a few of the houses as she followed the narrow street Crooked Nose chose, but none spoke to her memory. They all had a bleak, closed look inside the snowcapped pickets of their fences. After a while, she let her head sink once more and stared at nothing but the slush of wheel-churned mud and melting snow that oozed up over her ankles at each step.

Crooked Nose and his partner appeared to have a definite destination in mind. They hesitated only briefly at a street crossing and asked questions of no one, although several

times other Indians drifted by them, going down this street or that.

Somewhere a drum was beating, shrills and shouts punctuating the rhythm. It was toward this sound of Indian merry-making that Crooked Nose was steering.

The trail led to a large, whitewashed house. Two red-coated officers were just stepping into a high-wheeled cart as Bethany and her captors turned out of the street and into the yard.

One of the officers stared after them as they passed.

"My God, that one's just a girl!"

"Pity," said the other, "but no affair of ours." And the cart rolled away.

Bethany raised her head, half resolved to cry out to them for help. The breath was knocked out of her by a blow from behind before she could utter a sound. At the same time, Crooked Nose's hand planted between her shoulders, propelled her, stumbling, around the side of the house.

Here, in a trampled open space, a score of Indians were gathered in a ring. In the center of the ring a handful of emaciated men were being urged by thrusts from spears and rifle butts to perform a staggering dance to the beat of the drum. One or two of the dancers wore tattered remnants of blue uniforms. The rest were in odds and ends of rags beyond identification, or so close to naked that the distinction did not signify. All of them, Bethany did not have to be told, were American captives.

Crooked Nose tied the horse to a convenient picket. Then, grinning broadly, he shoved Bethany into the ring. Something sharp jabbed her in the rear, and to the accompaniment of whoops and jeers, she became one of the dancers.

Bethany caught a glimpse of scarlet at a window of the house. Faces were peering out at the spectacle from the windows—ruddy, clean-shaven, indifferent faces. As she looked up, one of them yawned and withdrew. The one beside it lingered an instant longer before doing the same.

They were strangers' faces—they had to be. Yet she felt an elusive twinge of recognition as though she had seen someone she knew.

The impression brought her to a standstill, but a gunstock swung at the backs of her knees pitched her forward into the

dance again. A skeleton of a man in the shreds of a linen shirt put a furtive hand to her elbow to save her from falling.

"Don't torment yourself looking to them for help," he advised in a hoarse whisper. "That's McKee, the agent, in that house, and him and the commandant give them *carte blanche* to treat American prisoners however they please. Nobody's going to interfere."

A rap from a spear handle silenced him, starting a flow of blood from his nose. The bystanders yelped their approval. Two or three discharged their muskets into the snow to keep the dancing lively.

It was the snow, falling thicker and faster, that finally quenched the Indians' enthusiasm for their entertainment. By then, several prisoners had dropped in exhaustion.

One man lay oblivious to the kicks of his captor. He was the man who had spoken to Bethany. She could not tell whether he was dying or already dead, but she felt no sorrow for him. His state was far better than that of those who had been left to endure.

Crooked Nose gave her arm a wrench to indicate she was to follow him. Drooping with weariness, she stood behind him while he untied the horse.

An Indian emerged from the snow gloom to speak to him. She assumed without interest that it was his partner, until the newcomer turned to her.

"You name Herbert?"

Bethany blinked at him through a veil of snowflakes.

"Herbert?" It had the strangeness of a sound only half remembered. "Yes."

The Indian disappeared. Or was it simply that she was too worn out to focus on anything more than briefly?

Impressions drifted in and out of her mind: Crooked Nose's partner joining in, an exchange of grunts and mutters that had no intelligible meaning for her. Like the horse, she merely stood and waited and hunched herself tighter against the storm.

An English voice, clipped and disdainful, broke into the discussion.

"Tell them that's the top bid. Not a pennyworth more will they get anywhere."

Again an echo of recognition quivered in Bethany's memory.

But the speaker stood somewhat apart from the Indians and was wrapped in a concealing cloak against the weather. She could not muster curiosity enough to wonder further.

The Indians resumed muttering among themselves. At last the interpreter turned to the Englishman.

"Agreed."

"Very well. They can come to my quarters for payment later this afternoon."

A hand cupped Bethany's elbow. "Now then, Miss Herbert, let's get you away from this. Can you walk?"

The hand shook her arm gently in an effort to rouse her from her stupor. "Miss Herbert. Bethany. It's Francis Ainsley. You remember me."

"Francis. Major Ainsley."

She accepted it without surprise, like the transformation in a dream of a blank wall into a boundless garden.

Only when Crooked Nose yanked the horse's halter and started out of the yard with him did she awake to what was happening.

"Oh, please, the horse!" she cried to Francis. "Please, they mustn't take it. Make them leave that, too!"

"That moth-eaten nag? What do I want of that?"

"They stole it," Bethany persisted. "It's not theirs. Please!"

"My dear Miss Herbert, I shouldn't be surprised if they've stolen nearly everything they possess. But that doesn't mean I can afford to barter it all back. There'll be better animals than that for you to ride when you're equal to it, I promise you."

Francis went on talking, moving her onward in the opposite direction, hailing a cart in the street, leaving her no opening to plead more.

And what could she say, anyway? That the horse was precious for having belonged to Joshua? That it was the last tangible reminder of him that she could still touch? How could she make Francis Ainsley understand?

Francis continued a bright flow of chatter as he helped her into the high-wheeled cart and they rolled along the rutted streets, but she found it difficult to attend to what he said. She seemed to have lost the power of concentration.

They alighted in front of a neat, two-story house.

"Nothing sumptuous," Francis said as he opened the door for her, "but a good deal more comfortable than other quar-

ters that have fallen to my lot. It's all thanks to some American gentleman who preferred to abandon his worldly goods here rather than live with them under British occupation—a choice for which I commend him heartily each day.”

He seated her on a polished chair in the hallway and left to return in moments with a matronly, dark-eyed woman whose features bore the stamp of Indian blood as well as white.

“This is Annette,” he said. “I’m putting you into her care. She does understand some English, but speaks only French. However, she has instructions to see you have everything you need, and I think you’ll find she’s very capable.”

And capable she was.

In no time, she had Bethany seated in front of a blazing kitchen fire, Bethany’s icy feet soaking in a tub of hot water, her sodden garments replaced by a soft woolen wrapper, her hands cupping a glass of heated wine.

Bethany stared about her with widening eyes. Glass panes in the windows reflected the fire’s gleam. An answering gleam was given back by the shining bottoms of an array of pans on the wall. Jaunty patchwork pillows lined the chair in which she sat. Blue-and-white gingham curtains hung at the windows, and a braided rug of mellowed reds and yellows adorned the spotless floor. Permeating everything was the delicious smell of roasting chicken.

Bethany sipped the wine, and her stomach responded with an embarrassingly loud gurgle. At once Annette was pressing a thick slice of buttered bread into her hand. Bethany tried to eat it daintily, but it was as much as she could do not to wolf it down in two gulps. She’d had nothing to eat on the long trail from the trading post except the scant rations of parched corn and the few leathery strips of jerky Crooked Nose had seen fit to dole out to her.

Nodding and smiling, uttering encouraging cluckings in French, Annette supplied a second slice of bread as soon as the first was gone, then set out a platter of biscuits and gravy and chicken. She quitted the kitchen while Bethany devoured this feast, but reappeared almost before Bethany—her hunger satisfied at last—began to notice her absence.

When Bethany declined a second helping, Annette led her upstairs to a little, slant-roofed bedroom. There she tucked

Bethany into a freshly made bed, and with gestures indicating that she was to rest, went away and shut the door.

Bethany stretched, savoring a billowy, thick quilt and the luxury of snowy sheets trimmed with lace.

I ought to be singing for joy, she thought. Instead, she felt an odd weight of depression. Francis Ainsley . . . She could not make herself be glad to renew his acquaintance even when he had rescued her from so desperate a plight. Perhaps, though, it was just that too much had happened too fast. Her battered body and spirits needed time to catch up.

Besides, now that she was warmed and fed and relaxed, every bruise she had received in recent days, particularly those dealt her today, was starting to throb. A disquieting presentiment was seeping into her that somewhere, something was wrong.

A knock at the door and Francis's voice: "Miss Herbert?"

The door opened a discreet crack. "Don't let me disturb you. I only want to be sure you have everything you wish."

"Yes. More than everything." She was pleased to discover that she could at least summon up genuine gratitude. "Thank you. I don't know how to say it strongly enough."

"No thanks necessary." He stepped inside, dismissing the idea with an airy wave. "Except possibly thanks to Providence or whatever. It was by sheerest whim that I stopped by the government house today. Even then I thought my eyes were playing tricks when I glanced out the window. I'm still finding my credulity a bit strained."

"I can't quite believe it myself. That it could be you . . ." She moved her head on the pillow, preferring not to discuss those humiliating antics of hers in the snow. Not yet. "I didn't know the British were in Detroit."

"Not know! But my dear Miss Herbert, we've been here since late last summer, upwards of six months or more. Your General Hull marched out and we marched in without a shot being fired."

He drew a chair to the bedside and sat down. "Forgive my curiosity, but I can't forbear asking where you have been all this time. When I left Boston, they still hadn't a clue as to what had become of you."

"I'm sorry," Bethany said in an automatic response to his hint of reproach. But recollecting it was not she who had been

in the wrong, she amended: "Sorry that it had to be that way."

"No call for apologies." Francis smiled, as though under the impression he had received one. "It's going on a year since all that unpleasantness, and I daresay everyone involved has undergone some alteration of perspective on the subject. Not to mention that it was well worth the candle to see my fair cousin utterly confounded for once in her scheming."

His obvious relish puzzled her.

"Aren't you and Christiana on good terms anymore?"

"We're on the most excellent of terms, to the best of my knowledge. However, I shouldn't have to tell you that when one speaks of terms in relation to Christiana, the terms are always hers. Almost always." Bethany had forgotten what an engaging grin he had. "Now, do tell me how you contrived to vanish without a trace and where you vanished to."

"I left before anyone was up and followed after my friends, the Pages, the ones who were traveling west. They were glad to take me along. Christiana knew how set I was on going with them. I'm surprised she didn't guess."

Francis leaned his head back and laughed.

"That's exactly what Christiana said you would not do! She declared that you were hoping they would jump to just that conclusion and go galloping off on a wild goose chase while you sat laughing up your sleeve at them in some friend's back parlor. Ah, Christiana, Christiana! So clever that at last she outwitted herself." He slapped a hand on his neat, white breeches. "Did you ever send them word of yourself after you were safely away?"

Bethany rolled her head in a slow negative. She wished he would postpone his questions until another time. The conviction that something was wrong was growing in her. She wondered if soon she would be regretting having eaten so heartily.

"I thought to write once, but . . ."

That was to have been when she reached Fort Wayne. She had meant to write home telling of her marriage. Virgil had planned to do the same.

"And your friends, the Pages, kept your secret, too, I suppose. Their destination was—let me see if I remember . . ."

"Fort Dearborn."

"Good God!" Francis sobered on the instant. "You weren't there when . . . ? You went through that bloody business?" At her small nod, he looked at her more sharply. "And that's how you came to be outside the government house today."

"Yes."

Let him assume she had been held captive the entire time, if he would, and by Crooked Nose. If ever she spoke of Joshua or Little Hawk, it must be in words measured with more judgment and care than she was equal to now.

"Well, that's over and done with."

Francis got to his feet and took her hand. "You're to consider this house your home for as long as it suits you. Annette is a pillar of family virtue, so you need have no fears on the score of being properly chaperoned."

"Thank you." Her voice broke against a welling of tears in her throat. How could she ever have condemned him as a calculating monster? "Thank you."

"If you must thank me, you'll do it best by giving me permission to write your father of you. There are ways of passing letters through the lines even in wartime. And I'm persuaded that when he learns of what you have suffered, there'll be an end to the quarrel between you."

Sudden pain drove like a lightning shaft through Bethany's middle. She drew her knees up to ease the cramp, and in that movement knew that something was indeed wrong, very wrong.

"You mustn't deny me the chance to mend the breach I helped to cause," Francis went on, taking her involuntary gasp for objection. He checked himself as a second stab of pain clenched the hand he held. "Miss Herbert! What is it? Are you ill?"

"Forgive me." She fought for a steady breath. "Call Annette, please. Tell her—bring cloths."

Francis retreated swiftly, and as swiftly Annette was there.

She wasted no time in exclamations over the gush of blood staining the white sheet, but set immediately to work doing what she could for Bethany with water and cloths. In a flurry of French she called down the stairs to Francis. Bethany caught the words *enfant* and *bebe*.

It was all over by the time a tap on the door ushered in a snow-damp, rumpled man Francis introduced as a surgeon. Bethany lay in a once-more tidied bed, her face pressed into a

pillow wet from the tears that would not stop flowing. She submitted, uncaring, to an examination by the surgeon, and drank the bitter-tasting draught he mixed for her without a question as to what it was.

"There, now, lass, you'll do well to leave off that weeping," he told her sternly. "You're blessed with a strong constitution that wants only rest and good food to have you presently fit as ever you were and able, very likely, to have as many babies as you please."

Other babies?

Bethany stared blankly after his departing back before turning over and burying her face again. She had lost the only baby that mattered. Joshua's baby. Lost it even before she was fully certain she carried within her one tiny, living continuation of Joshua's existence.

Now nothing was left to her. Nothing.

"Miss Herbert, you mustn't tax yourself like this." It was Francis, pulling the tumbled quilt up over her shoulders. "You are among friends. No one is going to judge you for something you were helpless to prevent, and you may be sure I shall write nothing prejudicial to your father."

But mingled with the concern in his tone was a tinge of condescension that had not been there earlier. She was no longer the maiden in distress, wretched but undefiled, that he had imagined. His hands tucked the quilt in around her in an unhurried fashion which, while not seeking intimacy, did not avoid it either.

The change from his former correctness was subtle, but its delicate sting pierced through the depths of Bethany's misery to bring a stiffening to her spine.

She raised herself on her elbows. "Not Miss Herbert." Her tone duplicated the faintly insinuating stress he had laid on the name. "Mrs. Kimbrough. Mrs. Virgil Kimbrough. I was married last August. At Fort Dearborn."

Through the first cushioning onset of the surgeon's sedative, she saw Francis Ainsley's knowing expression altered in quick succession by surprise, chagrin, and a very proper flush of apology.

Chapter XVIII

It was six weeks before Bethany descended the stairs she had climbed to the little bedroom.

A part of that time she had lain babbling in delirium, reciting incoherent lines of poetry, coaxing pigeons to come to her and Rachel on Boston Common, and laughing over her clumsiness on snowshoes.

At length, however, the fever ran its course, and she progressed by gradual stages from lying propped on pillows to sitting in a chair. Then she was brushing her neglected hair into soft waves and donning the clothes in which she had arrived, painstakingly cleaned and mended by Annette. Gradually, too, she began to think beyond the present day and to weigh what remained to her of the scattered pieces of her life.

"Have you heard if any other people from Fort Dearborn have reached here?" she asked Francis on the second afternoon that she was able to join him in the parlor for tea. "There was one man, Mr. Kinzie, who had a home in Detroit."

Francis helped himself to a lump of sugar from a pewter dish. "Kinzie? The trader, I presume. Yes, he's here. Or was."

"He's gone?" She was startled by the keenness of her own disappointment. She should have known better than to let herself start building on the chance he might be near. "Where is he? Is he safe?"

Francis smiled thinly. "Quite safe. He's a prisoner at Fort Malden at the mouth of the river. And for a time before that, I believe, he was detained under guard in a house just across from here in Sandwich."

"Because he was at Fort Dearborn? But he wasn't part of the military, or part of the fort at all. He's an independent trader."

"Very independent. He's suspected of passing information

to the enemy. There's altogether too much coming and going and sharing the pipe whenever his Indian friends have access to him."

The enemy.

Bethany's cup made a small clink against its saucer as she realized that those whom Major Francis Ainsley regarded as the enemy were friends and fellow countrymen to her. Lulled by the luxury of sleeping between laundered sheets instead of on the ground in a blanket and of drinking from china cups instead of dipping her fingers into a common kettle, she had come foolishly close to forgetting that.

"Sorry if he's a particular friend," Francis offered as an afterthought.

"He's more than that. He performed the marriage ceremony for my husband and me."

And perhaps he could tell her more about Virgil's family than she knew: where to seek them in Kentucky and how, if she should be reduced to throwing herself on the charity of her in-laws. Or he might have been able to learn if Rachel and Lyle were still at Fort Wayne and to send her to them.

Francis leaned forward in his chair. "About your husband . . . I hesitated to ask you for any particulars while you were so ill. But, well, I assume you and he were taken prisoner together?"

"No. He was killed in the last of the fighting." Her chin lifted as she added with a touch of pride, "He was an officer, an ensign."

"Ah. Ensign Kimbrough. Ensign Virgil Kimbrough, I think," he said, repeating the name as if he were tasting it. "It must be that you've been a widow longer than you could have been a bride. A pity I couldn't have included that circumstance in the letter I wrote your father, although I daresay I left him no doubt of your distress as it was."

It struck Bethany that there was something foxlike in his thin features, something too attentive, too alert. For by no means the first time since he'd rescued her, instinct warned Bethany to be on guard without her knowing why.

"I wonder if he'll reply," she said to the square of apple pastry on her plate. "My father doesn't soon forgive an injury."

"We'll wait, say, another two weeks. If there's been no word from him by then, perhaps you can write him yourself, being duly penitent and humble. I've no doubt that would turn the trick."

Humble, penitent, the prodigal daughter begging to return. Yes, her father likely would accept her home on those terms if she could bring herself to do it.

Unconsciously, she sat a trifle straighter in her chair. "There are friends I can go to. And there's Virgil's family."

"Virgil," Francis said again in that contemplative tone. He paused with his cup nearly to his lips, watching her across it. "Virgil Kimbrough. Not Joshua?"

So that was it. She had wanted Joshua so badly during her illness, it must be she had called for him aloud.

"He's dead, too," she said shortly.

She glanced away from Francis to the open window, letting the soft breeze cool the unnecessary heat from her cheeks. Outside that window, birds were chirping in spring sunshine that was as warm as summer. A wash of tender green covered every branch and twig, every inch of ground.

Incredible that the world could alter so in just six weeks. The snow and ice-edged slush she had stumbled through were vanished without a trace. As was the winter that had gone before.

She pushed the memories resolutely from her mind and turned back to finish her pastry and tea. The knowledge that Francis still was watching her kept her own gaze on her plate until the discomfort of being stared at was more than she could bear.

His smile had an odd satisfaction in it when she looked up.

"Just thinking." He lounged lower in his chair and crossed his legs. "Taking note of how you've matured in this past year, and thinking I should like to see you in a gown that does you full justice. Thinking, too, that I should like to hear the full tale of your adventures."

Bethany drew in a breath. "Grinding corn and gathering wood in an Indian village doesn't make for much of an adventure." She rose to her feet. "Shall I tell Annette she can clear the tea things now?"

Francis stood up too, lazily, not taking his eyes from her.

"I was thinking more particularly of the misfortune that

parted you from your husband in August and brought you here the last of March in time to miscarry a child that could hardly have been conceived more than two months before. Or should I not credit the word of the good doctor on your condition at the time?"

The breeze through the window was suddenly chill. It froze her where she stood.

Francis chuckled, and the chill was eclipsed by a surge of shame that burned her from toe to head.

"This amuses you?"

"I can't deny being diverted by such a shift in the fortunes of the pure and righteous maiden who left me the laughing-stock of Boston." His arm slid around her waist, drawing her to him with an insinuating familiarity. "I think it would be more diverting still to hear the full account. Which was the sire, I wonder, the potbellied one or the one with his face askew? Or can't you be sure? Or perhaps there were a dozen others who could lay equal claim to the honor."

Bethany shuddered away from him. "You are revolting!"

"Indeed? I shouldn't think you would find the caresses of a white man so offensive after you've been tumbled so thoroughly by red ones."

Bethany would have struck him, but he caught her raised arm in a bruising grip.

"No more of your fine airs, my sweet young widow. You are damaged goods. A red Indian's discard. A piece of soiled linen. In simple English, a whore."

He jerked her to him and set his mouth, insultingly wet and open, on hers.

Bethany fought to keep her lips closed against him, her teeth clenched shut, but his fingers wound in her hair pulled her head back and back until pain broke her resistance. His other hand clamped her buttocks, holding her tight while his knee drove a wedge between her thighs. Cold-blooded, passionless, without desire, it was a kiss meant to imprint on her every letter of the words he had just said.

"There, that's more like it," he said when at last he released her. "You owe me something, my girl. I've expended a considerable amount on your ransom and maintenance, and I think it's no robbery to expect payment."

Bethany stumbled back from him to where she could cling to a chair back for support.

"My father will repay you, every penny. More," she promised rashly.

The corner of his lip curled. "Yes, he'll pay, depend upon it. He'll pay handsomely for his precious daughter and for the slights he put on me. I'd have left you to the mercies of your yipping friends in the snow that day if I'd thought otherwise. But what your father pays is a matter quite apart from the warmth of your gratitude to me."

Bethany glanced toward the door. A dash from the room was possible, but what was the point? There was nowhere to go.

"You won't get a shilling if he hears I've been ill used by you. And if it happens, he will hear. I promise you that. So if you're looking to mend your fortune by selling me back to him, I'd advise you to have a care."

Francis smiled at her, a foxy baring of white teeth. He turned to the table, poured himself another cup of tea, and sat down to drink it.

Bethany sank into the chair opposite, waiting. She dared not waste her slim reserve of strength by standing.

"Do you know," he said as if they were resuming the mildest of conversations, "it seems to be a peculiarity of women who have shared their favors to consider themselves irresistible. Even my fair cousin will never concede that her many conquests are due no more to her fascinating charms than to the fact those charms were so accessible. Curious, for I've yet to meet the woman I'd find impossible to resist. You're by no means an exception, my dear Miss Herbert—Mrs. Kimbrough."

He allowed this to sink in while he replaced his cup precisely and deliberately in the exact center of its saucer. Bethany sat immobile. Her hands were clenched in her lap out of sight below the edge of the table.

"I see you don't believe me. Which, of course, quite proves my point, doesn't it?" He rested his head against the back of his chair and thrust his hands into his pockets, his posture one more statement that he no longer considered himself in the presence of a lady. "Nevertheless, I assure

you, you have no need to lock your bedroom door tonight. I'm content to extract my pound of flesh in a rather different fashion."

Her face stung as if from repeated slaps, but her voice shook only a little. "And what may that be, pray?"

"To begin with, a dinner party, I think, at which you will preside, suitably gowned, of course." His gaze traveled over the several large darns in her bodice, at the same time coolly assessing her figure. "And at which you will make yourself so agreeable and charming to my guests that they will be falling over themselves to find excuses to return."

Bethany had formed a fair idea of Francis Ainsley's preference in guests from the sounds that had filtered upstairs to her during her convalescence: shouts of raucous laughter, snatches of bawdy song, eruptions of oaths, the clatter of glasses, and the slap of cards. The fluctuations in Major Ainsley's fortune, she gathered, had much to do with the fall of the dice, and she had reason to suspect that there were aspects to his method of gaming that caused his popularity to fluctuate as well. Of the half-dozen or so men who had regularly frequented the house less than a month ago, none had come by in the last two weeks.

She was to be the bait to lure them back: an object of curiosity, of speculation; the youthful widow Ainsley had befriended, the plum he had plucked from the savages. But it was to be a dinner party, not an evening of drinking and gambling such as she had overheard. A dinner party suggested a certain amount of decorum. She could consent to that much—as if she had a choice in the decision.

"Splendid. It's a bargain then," Francis declared. "We'll have you the toast of Detroit in no time, and your little secret will stay just that between the two of us." He extended his hand for all the world as though she might have no reluctance to take it. "Who can say? We may grow fond of one another yet."

Nevertheless, Bethany did lock her bedroom that night—and every night after.

She could not help being diverted, however, by the purchases toward her new wardrobe that arrived via a moustached little Frenchman and a two-wheeled cart several days later.

There was a length of pale lilac mull, soft as a cloud, for the gown Francis required, and a quantity of gauzy white muslin for undergarments. Most agreeable of all was the package containing three pairs of white silk stockings and two pairs of dainty kid slippers, one lilac to match the mull and the other a muted yellow. How many months had it been since she had enjoyed the luxury of real stockings and shoes?

That same afternoon Madame Franc presented herself at the kitchen door. She was a plump young matron who proved to be not only Annette's daughter but an accomplished seamstress. For the next two weeks she was daily at work in the bedroom next to Bethany's, snipping, pinning, stitching.

Unlike her mother, she had a fair command of English and kept up a cheerful chatter while she had Bethany stand this way and that to be measured.

"This color, so becoming, Madame Kimbrough! Who would think Monsieur the Major would choose just that, this man? This style, Madame—the high waist, the straight lines: you have the perfect figure for it. Me, I would look like a sausage!"

Madame Franc laughed easily, talking of herself, her husband, their three young sons, their farmhouse a distance outside the town, the orchard they had planted and that was just beginning to bear. The topic was of small importance to Bethany. She took a simple pleasure out of once more enjoying the company of a girl who was close to her own age. She was sorry when it was time for the final fitting, for that meant an end to Madame Franc's visits.

"Unless Monsieur the Major is pleased with my sewing and wishes other gowns made," the Frenchwoman suggested as she guided the slim skirt down over Bethany's head. "The sketch he make, the little changes he think of, I follow each thing the best I can."

Bethany, on the other hand, was outraged by the manner in which this finery was being imposed on her. She had never wasted more than a passing glance on the gown at any stage of its development. Now, for the first time, she turned for a critical survey of herself in the gilt-framed mirror above the chest of drawers.

She had known the sleeves were to be mere puffs and the

neckline low; she had not known the puffs would droop just below her shoulders as if ready to slip away altogether or that the neckline would dip to expose the cleavage between her breasts almost to the last inch. Such of the material as did cover her breasts molded itself to their contours as if brushed on, and grew sheer enough for her to detect the tinted rounds of nipples through the fabric as Madame Franc tightened the laces in back.

The single diaphanous petticoat underneath saved the skirt from being equally transparent, but the clinging, soft folds were no less revealing. As Bethany drew back for an involuntary look downward, the skirt parted from ankle to hip, displaying a flash of white muslin and outlining the curve of calf and thigh as clearly as though she were nude.

"Bravo!" Francis had stepped into the room without troubling to knock. "What's needed next is a garter, one that's all rosettes and ribbons!"

Bethany whirled on him.

"What's needed next is two, no three, more petticoats and a chemise!" Her hands went to the bare expanse above the embroidered edging of the neckline. "And a shawl or a scarf or something. I won't be seen in it like this!"

Francis favored her with a cold smile that seemed the more austere because he was in full military dress: scarlet coat, white breeches, gleaming black boots. "I should have recalled that you are accustomed to only the utmost in modesty and delicacy. Perhaps there is something that can be done, if you would come down to the parlor presently to discuss it."

Bethany delayed no longer than it took her to shed the offending gown and resume the shabby but still serviceable blue wool dress she had made for herself by Joshua's fire.

She entered the parlor prepared to do battle and determined this time not to be bullied into defeat. Francis was standing on the hearth, idly fingering one of the candlesticks of polished pewter that stood on the mantel.

Without turning, he gestured behind him toward the yellow silk couch beside the door. "Before you say anything, I'd advise you to read that."

A sheet of folded paper lay on the yellow cushions.

Bethany sat down and smoothed the paper open with hands

that were admirably steady. The black loops and slants of her father's handwriting stared up at her just as she had expected. The message conveyed was brief and definite:

"... The young woman to whom you refer is unknown to me, nor do I wish any further knowledge of her. I recognize no claim of hers either to my affections or to my purse. You may inform her that I have but one daughter still alive to me, an infant, Deborah, born to my wife and me this November third last . . ."

Aside from a curt signature to balance a no less curt salutation, the letter contained nothing else. She did not read it a second time.

It was very much the answer she had expected from the start. Only if she could have returned home independent, in need of favors from no one—returned perhaps as Virgil's wife with Virgil at her side—might there have been a real reconciliation. But there was no going back now. Ever. To anywhere.

"Deborah," she said half under her breath without intending to.

"Yes." Francis flung around from the mantel. "You have a baby sister. Isn't that splendid? A new little pretender to the throne. And to put the final seal on the matter, the throne itself is toppling. Phillips Herbert hasn't a farthing to spare on you even were he so inclined."

That did startle Bethany. She let the letter slip from her lap to the floor. "What are you saying?"

He thrust a hand into his pocket and half pulled out another folded sheet, then stuffed it down once more. "It's all here in a note from Christiana, which, as it is meant to be a private communication, I shall not read to you verbatim. It would seem, however, that your father has suffered considerable reverses this past year due to bad judgment and to the outbreak of war. It has reached a point where his fine house has been put up for sale, and he and Christiana are seeking somewhat more modest quarters."

Gone, the house where she had grown up, the rooms that held memories of her mother and of a father who'd been less harsh. Gone, yes. As they had been since the advent of Christiana.

Bethany picked up the fallen letter. The bitterness of the few lines bit into her as before, but her own bitterness was just as strong.

"My heart bleeds for Christiana."

"By God, mine does, too!"

Francis's bark of laughter made her jump. He threw himself into a chair and clapped a hand against his knee. "Think of it. Poor Christiana saddled with an aging husband, a stack of debts, and a brat, after everything she's put me through to further her pretty schemes to avoid exactly that." His laughter was a wild combination of exultation and anger. "By God, I say that almost makes up for only a spent candle to show for the game!"

Abruptly his mood changed. He sat up straighter. His features thinned and sobered. "Which brings us round to the subject of your new gown."

"No, wait." She raised the letter like a shield to ward him off. "There's my inheritance. It's to be mine when I'm twenty-one or when I marry, and I did marry."

Why hadn't that occurred to her before? It was the key to everything: independence, security, freedom! "If you must have your blood money, I will pay it. My father can't prevent me from claiming it. It has never been under his control."

She knew she had caught Francis's interest by the way he sprang to his feet; but as quickly he was shaking his head. "It's no sort of a transaction to attempt at a distance and in the midst of a war. I've had a brush or two with solicitors in my time, and there's no end to the petty detail they demand: proofs to be produced, papers to be signed, documents to be read . . ."

His voice went on enumerating the obstacles, but Bethany had stopped listening after the mention of proof.

What proofs did she have? Virgil's ring, taken from her in a far-off wigwam on a frozen marsh. A marriage paper signed by herself and Virgil, Mr. Kinzie, and the Pages, reduced to ashes when the Indians set fire to the unwanted leftovers of the looted baggage. Mr. Kinzie in a British prison. The Pages—who could say where?

"And even were we to take Boston in the near future, which isn't at all unlikely, given the tendency you Americans

have to cut and run rather than do battle," Francis was going on, "I'm not at all sure I could trust you once I set you loose. No, my girl"—he tapped a forefinger against her cheek—"there are swifter and surer ways by which you can repay my bounty. And since you have formed the habit of eating regularly, I'm sure you will cooperate charmingly and enchantingly to the full. Therefore, you will wear the new gown precisely as I have designed it."

Chapter XIX

Bethany turned her head away from the balding, overweight man beside her and fluttered her fan lightly on the pretext of wishing to stir the mugginess of the summer evening. Even liberally overlaid with brandy fumes, Major Wilfred Leighton's breath was redolent of bad teeth and an uncertain digestion.

Major Leighton leaned closer to puff in her ear, "Has Ainsley ever told you that you have the most exquisite neck? So perfect. So beautiful." His arm lay across the back of the couch, which allowed his hand to slip downward unobtrusively to caress her bare shoulder.

"Major Leighton, please, you mustn't say such things."

She resisted the temptation to spread her fan to its fullest between her face and his. He might interpret that as an encouraging bit of coquetry, and the major was not a man to take encouragement lightly. She had foreseen he was likely to be a greater problem than usual this evening when she noticed how many glasses of brandy he downed after supper and how his eyes followed her wherever she moved.

"Don't try to tell me I'm intruding on Ainsley's private terrain. There's no real love lost betwixt him and you that I've seen these past months. Gratitude can warm a bed just so much, and there's not a thing he's done for you that any one of the rest of us wouldn't had we been on the scene at the right moment." The major's free hand found her knee and gave it a conspiratorial squeeze. "Perhaps with a more commendable ardor."

The day was far past when Bethany still blushed at the common assumption that she was Francis's mistress.

She had confronted Francis in a fury, demanding he immediately correct this misapprehension on the part of his brother officers shortly after that first dinner party, when the signifi-

cance of their extravagant courtesies and overfrank glances had dawned on her.

"But we don't want them disheartened by thinking you're too far above their touch, now do we?" he had rejoined equably. "Neither, I assume, would you care to have it put about that you are unattached and in the market for a proper protector. Or is it merely being party to a technical falsehood that disturbs you?" Leering, he had slid his hand inside the bosom of her dress. "For if that's the case, I'm sure I can rectify the situation in no time at all."

But the truth was that not once had he more than threatened to share her bed, nor so much as tested the knob of her bedroom door. She kept the door locked at night, nevertheless, even though she had come to a fair certainty that his physical wants were being satisfied elsewhere. How and where remained matters of conjecture. Where she was concerned, he was content to keep her humiliation fresh by handling her familiarly when it suited him, by probing now and then for details of her treatment by Crooked Nose and his friend, and by requiring her to wear the extremes of French fashion he designed for her after styles he had seen on the Continent. Tonight's gown, for example, was a creation of blue gauze molded to her figure, the trailing skirt caught up on the right side to reveal she wore no petticoat beneath. The close-fitted bodice was accented by a scrap of gold netting, which shaped, confined, and called attention to her breasts.

Yet, it was true, too, unpalatable though she found the fact, that as an officer's mistress she was accorded a degree of respect by his friends at a particular level that might not have been hers as an unfortunate young woman ransomed from the Indians after they were done with her. So far, the worst she had been obliged to suffer was a drunkenly ardent kiss or two snatched from her in a darkened hallway, some persistent below-the-table groping on one occasion, a greater freedom of ribald talk than a real lady would be expected to countenance in her presence—and of late, the increasingly heavy-handed attentions of Wilfred Leighton.

She looked hopefully over toward the table where Francis was dealing cards to himself and three others. If she could catch Captain Robbins's eye, he might extricate her from

Leighton's clutches in the bluff, good-natured way he had that never seemed to cause offence. He had done it before.

But Ned Robbins's back was to her, and he was studying his cards. Francis flicked a glance at her, but no use supposing *he* would come to her aid. His guests were welcome to as many and as prolonged *tête-à-têtes* with her as they pleased and on any subject, provided they were well entertained and did not stray too far from the gaming table.

"You do Major Ainsley an injustice," she told Major Leighton bitterly, shifting to face him more directly and at the same time moving her shoulder out of range of his sweaty palm. "I'm sure he places a high value on me."

"And you don't think he'd ever sell out? I'd pay a pretty penny for you myself. Even for just an hour alone with you." He hitched himself to regain her shoulder and bring his lips again to her ear. "Maybe arrange to drop a penny in your purse without Ainsley's being the wiser."

A commotion at the table—guffaws of laughter, and Ned Robbins scrambling to his feet, knocking over his chair in the process—spared Bethany from having to frame a reply.

"No, by God, I'm collecting my winnings and going home," Ned was saying cheerily. "The general's planning an inspection for tomorrow, and last time he came close to catching me dozing in the saddle." He crossed the room to Bethany and pulled her up into the circle of his arm. "Congratulate me, sweetheart. I'm flush for once. All I need to cap it off is a kiss from you."

Major Leighton heaved himself unsteadily from the couch as Bethany responded with a rare willingness to a hearty buss and the spatter of applause that accompanied it.

"Here now," Leighton said, blinking, "why didn't you say you were playing for those kinds of stakes? Count me back in the game, Ainsley. Only understand, my boy"—he wagged a pudgy finger at Francis—"I don't intend to take my winnings piecemeal: a kiss here, a paltry hand-squeeze there. Never have subscribed to that 'half a loaf's better than none' nonsense."

He had the grace to round off the remark with a chuckle and a wink and so put it on the footing of a jest. But Bethany was thankful to Robbins not only for separating her from him, but for reminding the rest of them of tomorrow's duty. The

game was at an end for the evening, and very soon the guests all took their leave.

Bethany stood at the window and watched the last of the departures, Major Leighton, weave an erratic path into the ruts of the street. She wondered aloud: "What sort of war is this that nobody has to march off to battle and get shot?"

"We're doing the best we can, my dear, against an enemy who won't stand up and fight."

Francis returned to the game table and gathered the scattered cards together. She guessed from the extra crispness in his tone that the evening had not been a profitable one for him. "We've chased the Americans out of Canada, taken Fort Mackinac and Detroit, destroyed Fort Dearborn, taken Fort Meigs and that place called Frenchtown on the Raisin River. The traffic on the Great Lakes is ours, and we've got all your shipping bottled up in the seaboard ports. I don't see what else we can do unless this fellow Harrison, who's supposed to be scouring the backwoods to fabricate an army down at Fort Wayne, gives us some fun before he surrenders."

He turned to her, jingling a few coins in his palm. "I presume you have a candidate in mind for the front line. Not Leighton, by any chance?"

Bethany let the curtain fall back into place. "That man is disgusting. He's vulgar. He's—he's odious."

Francis gave her a thin smile. "Even more odious than you imagine. He receives an annual income from home outside his major's pay, which means he's rarely too strapped to venture a sizable stake or to pay up if he loses." He flipped his hand over and the coins rattled onto the table. "Unfortunately, he's had a damned long run of good luck lately at my expense. And that means, my girl, that until the situation reverses itself, I don't want him put off by any high-flown notions on *your* part that you're too nice for his society."

Bethany snapped her fan shut scornfully. "Nothing will be reversed if he's too besotted to play. He didn't touch a card tonight."

"He will. If the stakes are to his liking. And this evening I believe he named what those stakes might be."

Bethany paused in the doorway to stare back at him. He was in earnest. Every line of his trimly elegant figure spoke of cold purpose that would not cavil at selling her services

like those of a prize animal if he saw worthwhile profit in it for him.

"No. I won't. You can't force me to that. You underestimate your friends if you think some of them won't have the decency to defend me against any attempt like that."

"They'll create a scandal, you think, to defend the virtue of a lady with your past experience and present reputation?" His laugh was as short as it was withering. "On the matter of will or won't, that will be Wilfred's problem, won't it? And one he may rather enjoy, being known as he is for somewhat fancying bedroom romps that are, shall we say, a degree or two off the beaten path? My only misgiving is whether you can perform up to his expectations."

His mouth hardened, and he advanced a slow pace toward her. His hands went to the fastenings of his breeches. "That, at least, I can readily put to the test."

Bethany turned her back on him while he was still speaking and walked disdainfully from the room. She would not let herself run. That was what he wanted: to frighten, to humble, to cow.

Her fingers were aching. She had to give special thought to the act of unclenching them from around the sticks of her fan. She noted as a passing curiosity that some of the fragile sticks appeared to be broken. The stairway at the end of the passage, and the haven above it—her door and its key—looked to be a mile distant.

The murmur of Annette's voice, talking to someone, drew her to the kitchen. She would join Annette in whatever washing up and tidying was left to do. Francis always observed a certain amount of discretion in Annette's presence. Perhaps she could find chores enough to keep her at Annette's side until he lost interest in inflicting further torment tonight.

Her distress was such that it barely crossed her mind to wonder what sort of company Annette might be entertaining in the kitchen at this hour.

She came to a standstill just inside the room when she saw the man in a calico shirt and moccasins outlined by the candle Annette had lighted. His features were shadowed, but recognition jumped in her pulse even before he turned more fully toward her.

"Little Hawk?"

Of all the emotions she might have expected to feel on seeing him again, there was none but welcome. She stepped forward, hands outstretched to him.

He accepted her hands gravely. "Strong Woman is well now? Strong Woman again?"

"Yes, I'm very well. And very glad to see you."

She was aware of Annette seated in a chair by the table, an interested spectator, but she could not help clinging to Little Hawk's hand a fraction longer than was necessary. How stupidly she had undervalued this staunch and honest man who, she now realized, had never offered her anything but honor and kindness according to the customs he lived by.

"Many changes for Strong Woman. Fine house. Fine clothes. Fine Englishman for husband."

"No. Not my husband." Bethany retreated an emphatic step. "Never. This Englishman . . ." She floundered for an explanation and began again. "Crooked Nose . . . Mota—"

Little Hawk cut in with a grunt of comprehension. "Mota dead." The statement carried a finality that discouraged further questioning.

But there were dozens of other questions she wanted to ask—such as how had he found her? What was he doing here? Where was he going? How was Sally? And, yes, had he been to Joshua's trading post?

"Here now," Francis slashed from behind her. He strode into the kitchen to glare at first one and then another of them. "What's going on here? What's this fellow's business?" he demanded of Annette.

Annette replied in quick, low-voiced French as she rose to her feet and smoothed her apron. She nodded at Bethany, and Bethany gathered that Little Hawk must have come asking for her.

"This man is my friend," Bethany said. "He's called Little Hawk. He saved me from being killed in the massacre."

The massacre, it jarringly occurred to her, that had happened almost exactly a year ago.

"Did he, indeed?" Francis eyed Little Hawk up and down as if the Indian were a piece of tainted meat that had been offered him for lunch. "I won't inquire into his motives, and I daresay it goes without saying that he managed to accomplish them." He rounded on Annette. "You know my rules

against allowing savages into the house. Any transactions you have with them can be conducted outside where the smell won't linger for an hour after and they won't be tempted to carry off anything not under lock and key."

He gestured imperiously from her to Little Hawk. "Tell him that his concern for Mrs. Kimbrough is appreciated and that he need not trouble himself on her behalf further, and get him out of here."

Annette surprised Bethany by addressing Little Hawk in a language that sounded like Potawatomi. Not by the twitch of an eyelid did he betray that he understood what Francis had said or, for that matter, that Annette was relaying any part of Francis's dictation. He spoke a few words of response, and inclined his head at the Frenchwoman's answer.

"No, wait," Bethany cried as he moved to the door.

"And you may tell him as well," Francis interrupted her, "that what I gave him in exchange for Mrs. Kimbrough is as much as he is ever going to receive from me. Whatever else he wants, let him see Colonel McKay about it at the government house."

Bethany looked from Little Hawk to him, incredulous. It wasn't possible that Francis could not distinguish between this man and the sorry specimens who had brought her here.

When she looked back to Little Hawk, he was gone, vanished into the night.

She had a crazy impulse to run after him, to beg him to take her along. But Francis strode past her and firmly shut the door. It was plain from his expression and from the tone of the French he leveled at Annette that the incident had in no way improved his irritable temper.

Bethany used his momentary distraction to slip quietly from the kitchen and make good her escape to her room. She heard him mount the stairs some ten minutes later. She held her breath as his footsteps paused outside her door, and she heard him mutter an oath, but he went on to his own room without any further disturbance.

She pleaded a headache the next morning as an excuse for not quitting her room until he had left the house. Her window looked onto the street, and she stood behind the curtain watching him go. How easy it would be just to walk out of the house herself in half an hour or so and to go on walking

down that street, out through the stockade gates and onto the road along the river. Who would challenge her? Who would even mark her passing?

But where would she go from there without friends or money or knowledge of the countryside?

She pressed her knuckles against the sill, staring in envy and hopelessness at a woman carrying a shopping basket, a cart delivering water to the neighboring houses, a barefoot boy rattling a stick along the pickets of the front-yard fences, a pig wandering aimlessly down the middle of the road—at everything and everyone using the street without a second thought for the freedom that was theirs.

Two men, one of them an Indian, the other clad in the butternut hunting shirt of a woodsman, sauntered into view from behind the water cart.

With a start, she saw the Indian was Little Hawk. Returning here, perhaps, to see her while Francis was away? And the other man—

It was impossible. She knew it was impossible, and the knowledge was a shaft of pain that drove the breath from her. Yet her lips shaped his name. The whisper of it filled the room.

“Joshua.”

As if she had shouted it, the two men came to a stop outside the gate. The woodsman appeared to be studying the house. His eyes lifted to the bedroom window and locked on hers.

Bethany had no memory of opening her door or descending the stairs. One moment she was gripping the windowsill against the wild lurch the world gave beneath her. The next moment she was downstairs, tugging at the front door and tumbling into his arms. And they were solid, substantial arms that almost crushed her.

“Joshua, Joshua,” she heard herself repeating foolishly, sobbing against the butternut shirt. “I thought you were dead. I thought they’d killed you.”

“It wasn’t for want of trying,” he said, his mouth brushing her hair. “If it hadn’t been that Little Hawk got suspicious of them in camp and decided to trail them . . . He found me before the fire they set got a really good start.” His arms tightened around her involuntary shudder. His voice rough-

ened. "And when I was finally able to hunt down that damned Mota, may he roast in hell, he told me you had died!"

She pushed away from him slightly, the better to look up into his face. He was thinner than she remembered, the strong bones beneath the skin more prominent, and a ridge of scar sloping from above his temple to behind his ear was only partly hidden by his hair.

"But you're here." She could not think beyond that just yet.

It was a movement behind him in the doorway that recalled her to the fact that Little Hawk was here, too, an impassive observer, and that the three of them were presenting a provocative tableau to passersby.

"Oh, come in. Come in, and shut the door."

She drew them into the parlor, her hand fast in Joshua's. There she turned at arm's length to drink in his reality once more. "Last night, if I could have known . . . Were you here, then, both of you?"

She glanced from him to Little Hawk.

Joshua nodded. "Close enough so Ainsley was guided by Providence when he chose not to follow Little Hawk outside. We got the truth from Mota's partner when at last we cornered him a month ago. By then, so much time had been lost that it seemed better for Little Hawk to scout ahead first to be sure you hadn't made a fine new start that shouldn't be interrupted."

"A fine new start?" Her essay at a derisive smile was a tremulous failure.

Joshua gripped her by the shoulders. "What's he done to you?"

"Not that, what you're thinking." She bent her head as shame beat up into her throat and face. "After Mota, I'm too dirty for anything but—but to be used as payment for his gambling debts."

At his explosive oath, she abandoned shame and crumpled against him once more. "Joshua, take me away from here. Please, Please! I won't be a burden. I'll do whatever you say. You can leave me somewhere or send me to Fort Wayne or Boston or anywhere. I won't care. Only please take me away!"

"Hush, hush." He patted her shoulder and rumbled her hair, soothing her as if she were a child. "We'll go as soon as Little Hawk can bring the horses up."

He directed a glance and a word to Little Hawk, who grunted assent and moved quickly from the room.

"Now." Joshua released her and put her from him. "You go pack anything you want to bring along."

It was a struggle to tear herself from him even briefly, but on his promise not to budge from the parlor while she was gone, she sped up the stairs.

She knelt by the blanket chest at the foot of her bed and pulled out her shabby blue dress and its petticoat from where she had hidden them when Francis suggested they be burned. The woolen dress and flannel petticoat, fashioned so carefully in Joshua's cabin, would be uncomfortably warm for these last days of August, but she stripped off the lilac mull she was wearing and donned them. Nothing provided for her by Francis would she take, except perhaps the stockings and slippers she had on. That much she felt she had earned.

Joshua met her at the foot of the stairs. Recognition of the dress and memory of their days together when she had worn it were in his eyes as he opened his arms to her. She went into them as if the long months in between had never been.

All that had not yet been said, that perhaps never would be said, was in that deep, long kiss. The very hallway seemed to catch the radiance of it and grow brighter around them.

But, no, the brightness was real. The front door, which had been closed when she descended the stairs, stood wide open, letting in a flood of sunshine. And in the midst of the blazing light, coldly contemplating them, was Major Francis Ainsley.

Bethany's gasp alerted Joshua. He swung around as Francis advanced into the hall.

"I trust it will not be too presumptuous of me to ask for an explanation of this," Francis said.

"Joshua Stark, Major." Joshua shortened the distance separating them with three unhurried strides. "We've met before."

"Indeed, yes, I believe I recall the occasion." Francis's lip curled slightly. Neither man offered to shake hands. "Joshua Stark. If I'm not mistaken, Mrs. Kimbrough has since mentioned you in the warmest terms." He raised inquiring brows

at Bethany. "Although I had received an impression that the gentleman was dead."

"I thought he was." Bethany's head was high, but she could not resist an upward glance at Joshua to confirm his reality once more.

"Ah." Francis's quickly suppressed smile told her she had somehow put a weapon into his hands, confirming something he had only guessed at till now: that this man was the Joshua she had called for in her delirium. "Well, my dear, your assumption may prove to have been only a little premature—unless Mr. Stark leaves this house and the vicinity of Detroit as swiftly as his heels can carry him."

"I have legitimate business in Detroit, a piece of property I own that wants attention," Joshua said. "One of the conditions of General Hull's surrender was, I believe, that no Americans here were to be molested or interfered with in the pursuit of their normal business."

"That condition is subject to interpretation, Mr. Stark. I do not consider an invasion of my quarters 'normal business' for any American. And being detained on suspicion of spying, I assure you, can be every bit as unpleasant an experience as being arrested on outright evidence. Nor would I rely too heavily on the supposition that outright evidence would be impossible to acquire should there be sufficient provocation."

As they spoke, each man was eying the other, measuring him inch by inch. Each of them was dangerous in his own way. Either of them could bring on disaster.

Bethany touched Joshua's sleeve. "Please, just go. He can do what he says, and he will. Please go."

"We'll both go." He drew her arm through his and started forward. "That was what we were on the point of doing, anyway."

Francis stood his ground as they advanced.

"Mrs. Kimbrough is not leaving with you. She is a prisoner of war taken in battle and is in my custody."

"I doubt you can find any legal sanction for your sort of custody." The muscles of Joshua's arm felt like compressed springs through the fabric of his sleeve. "When I was in England, the polite word for it was *pandering*—among other names."

He appeared to grow taller at each step. One more would

bring him shoulder-hard against Francis's considerably slighter frame.

Francis masked his retreat by making a diagonal sidestep that placed him more squarely in Bethany's path. His smile was an ugly twist in a face gone pale with outrage.

"You're familiar with her history, of course. How I literally pulled her from the flea-ridden blankets of a pair of rutting savages who'd been sharing her favors for God knows how long, and how she miscarried a brat whose father she couldn't even guess at?"

Joshua's fist caught him on the side of the jaw and sent him sprawling backward to the floor.

Francis was already gathering himself and rolling as he landed. Joshua shook free of Bethany's hold and shifted to counter any further move.

But Francis's roll, in another flip, fetched him up against the base of a narrow cabinet. He sprang to his feet and jerked open the uppermost drawer. The next moment he was steadying a heavy pistol in his two hands, the dull steel muzzle pointed not at Joshua, but at Bethany.

"Stand where you are, Stark. It would be worse than foolhardy to chance this weapon isn't fully charged and primed. And I'd have no compunction about pulling the trigger."

Joshua froze where he was.

"Frazer! Colby!" Francis shouted without moving his eyes from the motionless figures in front of him. "Get in here. Double quick!"

A pair of soldiers scrambled down from a cart waiting outside the gate and sprinted up the walk to the house. All Bethany could do was look on in a paralysis of despair as they swarmed inside, secured Joshua's hands behind him under Francis's orders, and marched him out to the street.

Francis, about to follow them, swung about in the doorway. The sunlight struck fire from the polished buttons of his scarlet tunic.

"Get upstairs and take off that rag," he ordered her in a vicious tone of raw triumph she had never heard from him before. "I'll see you have something far more appropriate to wear to the hanging."

Chapter XX

The rattle of the cart carrying Joshua from her drowned out every other sound in Bethany's ears. She wanted to scream, to rush in pursuit, to attack with her own fists the men who had wrestled him from the house. None of which, a grimly practical inner voice counseled, would have the least effect save to make matters worse.

She turned from the doorway when the cart receded from sight and her feet of their own accord drew her to the cabinet that had supplied Francis his pistol. The top drawer still hung halfway open.

She pulled it further out in hopes there might be a mate to the gun Francis had taken. She knew little of firearms and their operation, but at this moment she felt no doubt but that a pistol in her hands not only could be lethal but would be, if Francis were to appear before her now.

There was no second pistol, either in the top drawer or in any of the rest. Neither did her search yield anything else that could be described as a weapon. It lodged an idea in her mind, though, that had never occurred to her even at the height of her conflicts with Fish Eye.

She wanted a weapon; she must have one—something to keep ready to hand at all times. Against Fish Eye, she had been fighting for her own survival. When it was Joshua's survival that might be at stake as well, the ferocity at her command was suddenly tenfold. There was no hazard she would not dare, no advantage she would not seize for his defense.

"Madame?"

It was Annette, standing a little behind her. Annette, who must have overheard or witnessed nearly all of the morning's events, and who was doubtless drawing her own conclusions.

Bethany rose from her knees in front of the bottommost drawer, aware for the first time that tears were streaming

down her cheeks. She wiped a sleeve quickly across her face. "Yes?"

Annette's reply was a few brief words of French and a nod toward the kitchen. Both her voice and her expression were carefully noncommittal, but somehow Bethany understood.

Little Hawk! She had forgotten about Little Hawk.

He was there, waiting in the kitchen as he had been the night before. He listened gravely to an explanation that Bethany struggled to make as coherent and simple as she could. Now and again Annette put in a word in Potawatomi, to which he responded with a nod or a question, sometimes in his own language, sometimes in English. The humor lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth deepened imperceptibly to somber grooves.

"I don't know where they've taken him or what they mean to do with him," Bethany ended as her semblance of calm began to crack.

"Little Hawk find out," he said. "Little Hawk listen, look, learn much."

Moreover, he would run little risk of rousing suspicion in this town full of Indians constantly coming and going. Last night she had scorned Francis for disdaining to recognize that each Indian was an individual. Today that arrogant blindness offered Little Hawk the freedom of invisibility.

"*Oui, oui.*" Annette, arms folded across her full bosom, was nodding solemnly as if following Bethany's line of thought. "*C'est vrai.*"

Though Annette was Francis's housekeeper and very correct in the management of her duties, Francis—who was less than conscientious about paying wages promptly or in full—was clearly not an object of her wholehearted allegiance. Little Hawk, standing in the center of the kitchen from which Francis had ordered him banished just hours ago, was proof of that. Still, it was as well Little Hawk not tempt fate by coming openly to this house again.

"Suppose I learn something, how shall I let you know? How can I meet you without being seen?" Bethany asked him.

They agreed that he would pass back and forth along the street several times each night after full dark. A lighted candle in her window would signal that he was to wait until she

could slip outside to him. The whistle of a wood pewee near an open window would mean there was news that she must hear.

Annette brought her a basin and towel as soon as he was gone, indicating with a combination of practicality and compassion that Bethany should wash the tearstains from her face. It was impossible to mistake Annette's intent. Francis's spite must not be fed on his return by finding her the picture of hysterical distress he would be expecting to see.

A portion of Bethany's panic receded as she complied. It made a difference, knowing she was not alone. She had allies now, two of them. That was a strength to draw on even if, at the moment, there was little else that they could offer.

It was evening when Francis finally returned to disclose to her that Joshua was locked away in the guardhouse near the barracks. She could accept the information with a fair show of composure, having heard half an hour earlier in response to the pewee's call that Little Hawk had not been able to get a glimpse of Joshua all day. But the blue and lilac and rose dress scraps she was piecing together for a turban blurred briefly to a nondescript gray in the candlelight.

"And how long must he stay there to satisfy your offended honor?"

"I'm afraid the matter has progressed beyond a mere question of offended honor, if that is how you wish to put it. It seems that when I suggested your black-haired champion might be here as a spy, I wasn't far off the mark."

Francis had pulled off his boots and was slipping his feet into a pair of slippers Bethany had seen Christiana embroidering for him two Christmases past. "We discovered a paper on him purporting to be a list of furs—beaver, otter, bear, and the like—but with numbers set down beside each name that corresponded a shade too closely to the number of men in garrison here, and of heavy guns and so forth. Probably going to pass it on to this General Harrison fellow that's been stirring about in the Wabash country lately."

"I don't believe it. He's not a spy." Bethany snipped a dangling thread without regard for the gash the scissors opened in the edge of the fabric. "You said you would twist anything to get him accused of that if you could, and that's what you're doing."

Francis hung his coat over the back of a chair and, in his shirt-sleeves, lounged onto the arm of the same chair to sip from the mug of cider Annette had set out for him. "You are welcome to believe or disbelieve as you please. It's unlikely you'll be called for a character witness, intimately acquainted though the two of you would appear to be." He tilted the mug and took a deep, deliberate draught. "I do owe you a degree of thanks, I suppose. Rather a feather in my cap, having apprehended him."

Bethany was ransacking her memory for speeches of Joshua's that declared him to be cynical, without loyalties, without patriotism, the last person on earth to endanger himself on behalf of a cause.

Instead she visualized him standing in her father's drawing room, accusing Francis of prompting Indians to kill Americans; saw him and an Indian runner being entrusted by General Hull with a message to alert Fort Dearborn to the outbreak of war; heard Sally's statement that it was Mr. Stark who had ridden off to fetch the loyal Miamis under Captain Welles in a last-ditch hope of reinforcing the garrison, and heard his failure to deny the truth of it outright. Those solitary Indians who had come and gone at the trading post during the winter, never seeming to have any serious desire to trade, took on a startling significance for her. Most vividly of all she recalled the Indian in the red blanket who had come oftener than the others and who had been there for a time on that last day—the day Joshua had given her the news that the Pages were safe at Fort Wayne; the day he had burned what appeared to be a letter without allowing her to see it.

"What will happen to him?"

"What you might expect. Although it would go easier with him if he showed any sign of cooperation. I'd be for hanging him out of hand if we could be sure he has no interesting information to be extracted first."

"You'll never extract anything from him he doesn't want to tell," she said, a surge of pride mingling with her fear. "And if he comes to harm because of you, Francis Ainsley . . ."

Her grip on the scissors tightened as she pointed them toward him.

"You'll rip my heart out, snip by snip? Who would have supposed such passion lurked in that austere little Puritan

breast of yours?" Francis mocked. He rose lightly to his feet, and mockery congealed to menace. "If it's clemency you want me to consider, I should advise unstinted cooperation from you, too, rather than foolish threats."

His approach brought her halfway out of her chair, the scissors raised. "You've had your pound of flesh from me. I've more than paid back any I owe."

"Not quite the full pound." He stopped a prudent distance from the points of the scissors. The mask of urbane superiority slipped from his features, and she saw how raw was the anger beneath. "I don't doubt we shall reach a parting of the ways presently, but where and when and how shall be my decision this time. And at my initiative. If you don't understand your position yet, you will before that day comes. And there'll be no sulks or tantrums or foolish threats along the way, provided you have the least desire to see this Stark person again while he's alive."

"You'll let me see him?" she asked too quickly.

"Is that what I said?" The mask remolded itself as bland as ever. He was sure of her now. "When it's convenient, perhaps. And if I'm persuaded it's worth the trouble."

Bethany placed the scissors carefully on the small work-table beside her and began to fold up her pieces of material. She would consent to anything—to be with Joshua again, but Francis would not hear her say it. Not this evening. She had bled enough for his entertainment for one day.

Her resolve grew less firm by the end of a week from which she gained nothing more substantial than continuing barbs and tantalizing half-promises unfulfilled. When Little Hawk, a few evenings later, told her in a puzzled undertone that Joshua had been taken from Detroit to closely guarded quarters across the river in Sandwich, her pride began to crumble in earnest.

Francis confirmed the information—and added at the end of the second week that it had been decided to send Joshua on to Quebec. She could refuse no longer to bargain on his terms, and he knew it.

"Unfortunately, it is General Proctor's express order that no Americans be allowed access to the prisoner," Francis said with false regret to her plea for permission to see Joshua at least once before he was taken away. He paused to let her

digest this. "If you're going to look that stricken, I suppose we could find a way around the difficulty. Say you were to be spending a day or two in a cozy retreat some distance downriver where it would be convenient for his escort party to stop for some brief refreshment."

Again he paused for her to feel the full weight of his meaning. "Oddly enough, Leighton mentioned to me just today that he was thinking of acquiring a small country retreat that would exactly suit the purpose."

If a stare could turn a man to stone, Bethany's would have immobilized him forever. She did not flinch nor pretend lack of comprehension. Inside, it was she who had gone rock-hard and as cold. "Do you guarantee that Mr. Stark will be brought there? And on the first day, the day I arrive? And that I may speak with him in private?"

"You never say die, do you?"

His swift frown conveyed no admiration of the fact, but her capitulation represented too important a plumping for his flattened purse for him to risk driving her off over a matter of details. "There's no intent on my part or Leighton's to deceive you. You have our word to accommodate you as you wish to the best of our ability—within reason."

Which was no guarantee at all that he would not serenely betray her should she trust them; but, her mind already leaping ahead, she resolved to take the chance.

It was a chance Francis and Leighton would be taking as well, she reflected grimly as she stole into the deserted kitchen the night before the appointed day and selected for herself a razor-sharp knife small enough to be hidden under her clothing. Upstairs, she snuffed the candle that had summoned Little Hawk for a last whispered conference in the shadow of the woodpile behind the house.

Their plans were set. From the time that Joshua and his guards rode out of Sandwich until they gained the protection of the fort near the mouth of the river, Little Hawk would not be far from them, alert for the least opportunity there might be to spirit Joshua away from his captors. And even if that frail hope failed—her hand touched the knife concealed now under her pillow—somehow Bethany would get out of that house they were taking her to.

She would be waiting to guide her to the home of the

seamstress, Madame Franc, or to that of an American family, or if need be, as far as the American lines, wherever they might be. A trek of a hundred miles or more through wilderness held no distress that she would not prefer to the degrading existence that was the alternative.

If she had lacked a final spur to her resolution, Francis supplied it as he steadied her into the canoe that was to carry them across the river.

"Don't tell me you're trembling, Mrs. Kimbrough. It must be you are unfamiliar with how very safe a passage this type of craft will give us, for I can't imagine there is much else this day has in store that will be outside anything you have experienced often and readily before."

Bethany gave him no answer. She bent her head so her face was hidden by the brim of one of Annette's bonnets. The wardrobe she had received from Francis had pointedly not included items that would encourage her to stray far from his house. The practical calico gown she was wearing for this morning's journey was a borrowing from Annette, too. How superbly practical when it became important for Bethany to look like any other woman of the countryside, the smug Major Ainsley could not even guess.

Her heart was racing at such a clip by the time they were mounted on the horses provided for them in Sandwich that her hands must have communicated a measure of her tension through the reins. The horse fidgeted and sidled under her, mercifully claiming her full attention as she fought to establish her control.

Meantime Francis amused himself by commenting: "A trifle out of practice, my dear? I make no doubt you'll find the old skill returning before the day is out."

It was fourteen long miles of farm- and woodland-bordered road to Major Leighton's country retreat, which proved to be a square frame farmhouse set among an assortment of log outbuildings.

The major was at Bethany's side as soon as she drew rein in the yard. He beamed on her like a schoolboy about to dip his spoon into a mound of strawberries and cream as he helped her dismount.

She could not honestly be sorry for the cushioned chair he ushered her to in the sparsely furnished sitting room nor for

the glass of sherry he pressed on her. Every part of her body was reminding her that it was over a year since she had last been on horseback—although nothing could have dragged the confession from her in front of Francis. But Bethany didn't intend that anyone should lose sight of what she had reason to expect in return for her presence here.

"I've taken the liberty of ordering my man to prepare a small lunch for you," the major said as he leaned over her shoulder to refill her glass. "I'm sure you must be famished after your long ride. I've put dinner off an hour until a few other guests can arrive." He gave Francis a jovial leer. "That Pocahontas-type friend of Gridsby is coming with him, and is bringing a little French friend of hers. You're acquainted with the, ah, ladies, I believe, Major. And, of course, you'll be staying on to dinner."

Bethany set her glass on a low table beside her without tasting the replenished wine and—more to her credit—without spilling a drop.

"If you don't mind, I'd prefer to have my interview with Mr. Stark first as we agreed. If he's here."

The two men exchanged glances.

"He's here," Leighton said doubtfully. "Ainsley had him brought here last night. But he's a surly fellow. Refuses to talk to anyone. Says in particular he won't see you."

"He knew I'd be here?"

She hardly needed Francis's faint smile and fainter shrug to guess Joshua would have come by this information or in what lurid detail it had been delivered.

More jarring, though, was the news that Joshua had been spirited here under cover of night. What of Little Hawk in that case? Might he still be in Sandwich, or watching somewhere back along the road for Joshua to pass? Perhaps there was nothing to be gained by forcing herself on Joshua against his wishes—and in the humor he must be in by now.

Another look at the bland amusement on Francis's face decided her. Bethany rose to her feet, her hand out to Leighton in a gesture of appeal. "Please, take me to him, anyway. Otherwise, I won't be able to think of anything else."

The quick rise and fall of her lashes that accompanied this hint caused the major to finish off his wine in a gulp. "Well,

why not? Get the nasty business over and forget it, eh? Jolly good!"

His thick arm pulling her close to his side and his chuckles enveloping them both in odorous vapor, he propelled her to the door, where he called to a soldier laying silverware on the table in the dining room: "Edwards, escort this lady to the prisoner. She's to have fifteen minutes with him. The guard's to be right outside the door, on the alert and ready should she want him."

Bethany was thankful rather than curious as to why Francis should elect to stay behind and so forgo another opportunity to gloat.

Edwards led her out behind the house to a log barn where a heavily pockmarked man lounging on an upturned bucket straightened and reached smartly for his musket on hearing Leighton's orders. "Over there in that corner," the guard said, opening the door for her and using his musket as a pointer. "Only I don't think you'll have much to fear from him, missus, the shape he's in."

Bethany stared aghast at the man who struggled up from the straw as the door closed. One sleeve was partly torn from his shirt, and despite the fact that his wrists were bound together, his left arm hung oddly. A smear of dried blood crusted one cheek, and the dark blotch of a recent bruise mottled the other. Beneath it all, his skin had a sickly yellow pallor. She understood why not even Francis had relished sharing this confrontation with her.

"Joshua?" She was not fully certain it was he. Then: "What have they done to you?"

He stood leaning his good shoulder against the wall. There was no welcome in his scowl.

"Should I ask what they've done to you? I told them I didn't want you here. I don't want any sacrifices on my account."

Stung, she turned from him to a window, which by its size and low sill suggested this barn might originally have served as a house. "Perhaps I have accounts of my own to settle." She winked clear a stupid blur of moisture in her eyes. And pressed her arm against the flat shape of the paring knife concealed beneath the modest bodice of her borrowed dress.

The window looked out on a small paddock flanked by a

haystack on one side and an orchard on another. Only two horses occupied the enclosure at present, the two she and Francis had ridden from Sandwich. No one, she noted in a flash of indignation, had yet troubled to relieve them of their saddles.

Then she winked again.

Something—or someone!—in the orchard had moved. It could have been a trick of sunlight and shadow among the trees. It could have been the sway of a low branch in the wind. Or it could have been the stealthy glide of a man darting from the protection of one broad tree trunk to the next.

“Little Hawk,” she breathed.

“What?”

Incredulous, she swung around to Joshua, her anger and hurt swept away on a tide of reckless excitement.

“He’s out there in the orchard. I’m almost sure! He promised to be nearby in case there was a chance for you to break free, but I thought . . .”

But what did it matter now what she had thought? She slipped aside from the window and began fumbling to retrieve the knife from its hiding place. “Can you ride?”

Joshua was edging himself along the wall, still using it as a support, to where he could see into the paddock. She wondered, alarmed, how long he could keep his feet, let alone sit a galloping horse. But his whistle, sudden and surprising, was unwavering and true: the pewee’s call.

Seconds later, the bright sweet notes of the answer came from the trees.

Joshua leaned for a cautious, more intent scrutiny of the landscape before drawing back.

“Where are the guards posted?” he asked.

“There’s only the one outside the door.”

He shook his head. “There is another one somewhere. There are two of them.”

“There was a man in the kitchen, eating bread and cheese, when I passed through. A soldier. Then there’s Edwards, the major’s man, and Francis and the major. They’re all in the house.”

She tugged at his good arm to pull him down onto the dirty straw where she could kneel beside him and apply the knife to

his bonds. Bless Annette for maintaining her cutlery at razor sharpness!

"How bad is it?" she asked, seeing him wince when she inadvertently shifted the position of his other arm. "Is it broken?"

"Just sprained. Painful, but not killing."

She wished she could contrive a sling for it, but there was nothing suitable at hand and no time to search. It seemed they spoke barely a dozen words more to each other. Yet with the parting of the last strand of the rope, the next step required no further discussion. She handed him the knife, which he thrust into his belt. Flexing the numbness from his fingers, he grasped a loose board on the side of one of the empty stalls and yanked it away.

He swayed unsteadily from the effort, and for a moment rested his head and shoulder against the wall again. Bethany's heart hung between beatings while she waited. Still . . . if he could hang on to a horse for even ten minutes, it might be time enough to lose himself in the woods along the road—ten minutes' head start with Little Hawk to help.

"Missus, something wrong in there? What's that I heard? You all right?"

The guard was rattling the clumsy latch of the door.

Joshua pulled himself upright and nodded at her. Bethany sped to the door.

"Please," she called with a frightened note that was not too difficult to feign, "I think I've hurt myself. Can you come help?"

Joshua flattened himself alongside the door. As it burst open and the guard lunged through, the stall plank swung down in an arc that struck him a staggering blow on the back of the neck. He lurched two steps farther, regained his balance, and wheeled around, glaring at Bethany.

"Here! What—?"

Without pause for thought, Bethany lowered her head, hunched her shoulders, and butted as hard as she could, catching him squarely under the breastbone. The man folded to the floor like a sack of grain, the air going out of him in a surprised and anguished grunt. But the impact left her blinded by rocketing stars and whirling blackness.

"Run!" she gasped to Joshua. "Run!"

"Not without you."

Her arm was seized in a grip more powerful than she'd supposed him capable of exerting. She was half dragged, half steered to the window. They had no time to waste on debate, or on modesty, either. Skirts gathered above her knees, Bethany scrambled up onto the sill and swung her legs to the outside.

Before she jumped, though, there was something she wanted him to know.

"Joshua, that baby I lost . . . It was ours."

He swore beneath his breath, fixing her with a look that would have been unreadable even without the mask of blood and bruises on his face. But it was the tone, not the words, that she heard—and she jumped to the ground satisfied in the knowledge that whatever the outcome of this day's wild gamble, it would have been well worth the try.

Had the horses been fresh, there might have been a problem catching them. As it was, she had no trouble grabbing up the drooping reins of the mount that had been so mettlesome earlier in the day. The animal scarcely sidestepped at the sight of Bethany running pellmell for it, and stood to let her use a fence rail to step up into the saddle. By then Joshua was mounted, too, and Little Hawk was at the gate, pulling it open. He swung himself up behind Joshua as the horses cantered through.

Bethany heard a strangled shout behind them. The guard had regained his wind. Shortly after, there came the report of a musket, already too distant to be of concern.

The horses were thundering past the house, swerving left onto the road. Over her shoulder she saw Francis dash from the house and run the length of the yard as if he expected to intercept them on foot, Major Leighton at his heels. It would be a while before they could round up other horses and launch the pursuit in earnest.

But no! A backward glance up the road showed her a small cavalcade of riders just coming into view. At least two wore scarlet coats: no doubt Leighton's expected guests. They would be on horses which, if not rested, had likely not been pushed hard today either—mounts that would be ready to hand.

"Look there," she shouted, waving a hand to alert Joshua.

She dug her heel hard into the side of her horse. "Hurry! Run!"

Both horses leaped ahead at a pace that quickly put several bends of the road and the intervening woods between them and the house. But it was a pace the horses could not keep up for long.

Within half a mile their speed was flagging. Worse, by the end of the first mile, the jolting had taken its toll of Joshua's strength. He sagged lower in the saddle until he was bent nearly double, his good hand clutching the horse's mane. Little more than raw determination and the aid of Little Hawk's arms prevented him from falling off. Not far beyond, the road narrowed to a trail that only the most foolhardy of riders would dare at better than a walk.

Bethany pressed up alongside them. Joshua's skin was the color of ashes. Beads of sweat glistened on his face. She exchanged glances with Little Hawk.

The Potawatomi slipped to the ground. "We leave horses. Get into woods."

Joshua made a groaning protest, but Little Hawk pulled him easily from the saddle. Much too easily. Bethany's heart turned over. Should Francis overtake them now, he'd need do nothing more to ensure his revenge than to decree that Joshua ride on to Quebec at once. Joshua would never make it alive.

"You come," Little Hawk said with a curt gesture that urged her to hurry.

Bethany shook her head. "They'll see the horses. They'll know where we've gone."

Yet to lead the horses with them into the thick woods would be a severe encumbrance if not a sure means of being discovered. Her mind was working furiously.

"I'll ride on a mile or so, or as far as I can, then send the horses off on their own. When it's safe, I'll come back this way through the woods."

Before anything could be done to stop her, she caught hold of the reins of Joshua's horse and kicked her tired animal into a reluctant run. Joshua's voice followed her, calling her name, but she bent lower over her horse's neck, driving it on until she gained a bend in the trail. When she did trust herself to snatch a glance backward, the road was empty as far as she could see. Joshua and Little Hawk had vanished.

She broke a branch from an overhead limb and used it to urge her charges on. Now that she was alone, her courage was a great deal less than she had pretended. Every snap of a trampled twig, every whistle that might or might not be a bird cry, every roughness in the trail that forced her to slow down, every dip or twist that shortened her view of what lay behind persuaded Bethany that her enemies were hot on the track and closing in.

At length even the switch was of small effect on the lathered horses. She kept casting about for a spot to abandon them, but everywhere it seemed they would stand out like signposts pointing the way she had come.

A faint boom of far-off thunder gave her a fleeting hope. If a storm was building up, perhaps it would break in time to discourage her pursuers before they found her. But the September sky remained bright blue despite another boom and another. And now the vista ahead of her was brightening, too.

Lake Erie was coming into sight. One more bend of the road and she had an open view of it—and of the fortified stockade that was the British stronghold, Fort Malden, at the mouth of the river.

The horses halted of their own accord as she gazed at the structure and the dots of scarlet moving here and there around it. There was no going farther. Should she just sit and wait to be overtaken?

She kicked free of her stirrups and dropped to the ground. A slap to the rump of each animal sent them ambling off into the woods. She turned, scanning the edges of the trail for a thicket that might hide her.

But she did not move from where she stood.

A file of red-coated men had come galloping around that bend in the road. To her staring eyes they appeared to be half a regiment.

There were, in fact, just five of them: the two soldiers who had been Joshua's guards, Edwards, Major Leighton, and in the forefront, Francis. He spurred toward her, leaped down, and gripped her by the shoulder.

"Where is he? God damn you, *where is he?*"

Each syllable was emphasized by a violent shake that snapped her head forward and back.

"I—don't—know," she gasped, at the risk of biting her

tongue. Her legs were trembling so that they would have collapsed under her if he had not been holding her up, but there was a sweetness in being able to add: "Gone."

"Fan out. Beat the woods," Francis shouted to those behind him. "He can't have got far."

"As for you . . ." He whipped a length of rope from his saddle and with swift, cruel jerks lashed Bethany's hands behind her back. The other end of the rope he looped around a sapling and secured it, nearly dragging her feet as he snubbed the line up short. "I fancy you'll stay where you're put this time."

Major Leighton rode up to regard her with more puzzlement than anger, and for once without a trace of lust. He lifted his head as another salvo of booms echoed from down the lake shore.

"By God, that is exactly what I said it was: cannon fire. Commodore Barkley's putting it to the Yankees in fine style, I should say."

"Teaching them it's a serious mistake to cross His Majesty's forces," Francis said, glaring at Bethany. "A lesson it appears each of them has to have individually drummed in."

He was about to remount when an exclamation from Leighton stayed him. Bethany saw it, too: a sloop flying the British colors scudding under full sail around a point of land.

In short succession, two American gunboats appeared in her wake. Smoke, like a puff of white cotton, blossomed from the side of the nearest American boat. A second or two later, the flat boom of the shot reached the watchers on shore. The British flag at the sloop's masthead flapped and shivered. Slowly, unevenly, then picking up speed, it began to descend.

Briefly, Bethany forgot where she was and why: "She's striking her colors! The battle's ours!"

The flat of Francis's gloved hand struck her cheek a blow that slammed her head against the sapling. Leighton, eyes averted, wheeled his horse and rode off into the woods in the direction the others had taken. Francis, vaulting into the saddle as if there were furies at his back, followed.

Bethany did not try to check the tears that spilled down her face. She was bone tired and sore from the unaccustomed riding, drained of her last reserves of nervous strength, and frightened. Yet she had accomplished what she'd set out to

do. They might find the horses in these woods, but they would not find Joshua. He was miles away—given his and Little Hawk's woodlore—and would be securely hidden by now. He was free.

And this battle on Lake Erie—this victory—was an omen, she told herself. A promise. It must be.

Chapter XXI

Bethany did not pass that night in Major Leighton's farmhouse nor in Major Leighton's company. Through the dusk and then the starlight of the mild September night, she was obliged to ride the weary miles back to Sandwich beside a tight-lipped and livid Major Ainsley.

"If anyone asks you, you were alone with the prisoner no more than five minutes," he told her. "You screamed for help when you saw he had somehow got himself free—and he used the opportunity to overpower the guard. You were forced at knife point to ride off with him as a hostage until he got too close to Fort Malden and let you go. Understand?"

But no one did ask her, for no one had the opportunity. At Sandwich she was hustled into a canoe and paddled in forbidding silence across the river. She was briskly escorted by Francis through the Detroit gates and on up to her own room, where he removed the key from the inside of her door and inserted it in the lock from the outside. She watched the door shut and heard the lock click, now making her a prisoner in earnest. But she was too tired to care for anything except rinsing the dust from her face and hands in water from the washstand pitcher before tumbling into bed.

How Francis and Leighton explained their loss of Joshua to their superiors she never knew. But when Francis flung her door open and stalked in late the following day, it was obvious he was in no mood for trifling.

"Dressed for another excursion, are you?" He eyed the borrowed petticoat and short skirt of yesterday's journey, which she had donned again today in preference to the filmy draperies of the wardrobe he had given her. "I think not, madam. You've had your day, you and your Mr. Stark and your Commodore Perry."

"Commodore Perry?" she repeated to mask a fear that he

was telling her Joshua had been recaptured. "I don't believe I'm acquainted with the gentleman."

"It would be as well for you if our fleet on Lake Erie could say the same. Every vessel of it was either sunk or taken by him in that battle yesterday. You may meditate at your leisure on what sort of favor that will earn your Mr. Stark when he's brought in."

"If he's brought in," Bethany hazarded.

The angry flush that darkened his face confirmed that Joshua was yet to be caught.

"Take those rags off," Francis said, glaring at her dress. He swept her gowns from their wall pegs in a single stretch of his arm and hurled them into the hall.

"Do you want me to take them off for you?" he demanded when she continued to stand where she was, not moving. "Get those clothes off, madam, every stitch of them. Unless you're in the market for worse treatment than you've yet received."

Slowly, apprehensively, she obeyed—removing her slippers, her stockings, the overdress, then the long petticoat, while he ransacked drawers and the chest, flinging undergarments and even her secreted blue wool onto the pile in the hall.

At last she was clad in nothing but her gauzy shift. She retreated to the side of the bed, reaching behind her for a corner of sheet to cover herself. But she was not quick enough.

Francis seized her by the front of the shift and ripped the thin material apart from top to bottom.

"I said every stitch," he hissed through clenched teeth as he pulled the remnants from her and pitched them toward the door. "By God, madam, the next time you fancy riding out to make a fool of me, you'll do it as Lady Godiva."

Bethany dragged a corner of the sheet across herself. His eyes were suddenly alert to the slim contours of her form in a way that gave her fresh cause for alarm.

"Have a care how you treat me! You can't keep me locked away from everyone forever, and there are tales I can tell of how the prisoner escaped under the noses of two clever officers. General Proctor may find my story more interesting than the account he heard from you and Major Leighton."

"You little strumpet, will you threaten me?"

Francis strode to the door and shut it. In another stride, he swept her up off her feet and threw her face-down across the bed. "If you will meddle in men's affairs, you'll learn what it is to be used like a man!"

He was on her before she understood exactly what he intended. The bedclothes muffled her outcries of shock and pain. Her arms pinned beneath her were helpless. The kicks she tried to deliver up and back at him only heightened the fury of his attack. And all the while he lashed her mercilessly with the vilest obscenities she had ever heard.

His fury spent, he left her exhausted and sobbing on the blood-streaked sheets, and quit the room with no more ceremony than when he had entered, locking the door once more from the outside.

It was a scene that was repeated with variations, none of them pleasant, at intervals in the days that followed. She had communication with no one else. The evening he discovered her leaning from her window, a blanket draped about her shoulders, he brought hammer and nails and nailed the window shut. Annette, she gathered, was under orders to remain downstairs.

For a time she set her lighted candle in the window every night in the old signal, but she hardly expected a response to it. And there was none.

Very likely Joshua and Little Hawk were miles from this town, safely beyond reach of the British in a place where Joshua could mend his hurts and regain his strength undisturbed. Bleakly, she hoped this was true. She spent hours reflecting on one improbable scheme for escape after another, and could devise none that promised even an outside chance of success, whether she had friends waiting or not.

Francis, as sole custodian of her key, brought Bethany's meals to her himself on trays which he later returned to the kitchen when it was convenient. Bethany fell into the habit of lingering over her breakfast tray for most of the morning for what small diversion it offered in her tedious isolation.

Then came the day when she listlessly drained the last of her cooled coffee and felt the nudge of something solid against her lip.

She peered at it. A ring. And not just any ring, she realized

as she picked it from the cup and wiped it dry on a corner of her napkin. A heavy gold signet ring which, if pressed into soft wax, would leave a clear imprint of the initials VK—for Virgil Kimbrough. Her wedding ring!

She clenched her hand tightly on it, then opened her palm to assure herself she was not mistaken. There was only one person from whom Annette could have obtained this—Little Hawk. And only one meaning it could have: help was near.

Next to be considered was a place to secrete the ring where Francis would not happen on it and yet where she could snatch it up quickly should her release be sudden. She spent the balance of the day selecting and rejecting hiding places, folding one of the bedsheets this way and that in an attempt to contrive some sort of covering for herself—and speculating on how she would be set free and how soon. Tomorrow, perhaps? A day or two after?

In a spurt of defiance born of new hope, she only tucked the folds of her latest experiment around her more firmly when she heard Francis on the stairs toward evening.

He unlocked the door and shouldered it open, carrying a small tray on which two well-filled wineglasses splashed dribblets of liquid over their edges at his every step. He set the tray on the top of the chest of drawers with elaborate care and gave her somewhat Grecian attire such a concentrated scrutiny that she was afraid he could detect her excitement and perhaps guess the cause.

"Very ingenious," he said a trifle thickly. "You'd be the sensation of the party if you were going. But you're not going. I've already made your excuses. Indisposed, that's what I told them. You're indisposed."

Bethany retreated to the room's one chair. If it were anyone but Francis, she would have said he was drunk, but she could not recall ever seeing Francis drink enough for it to show.

"Told who?"

"Robbins. Captain Robbins, whose friends are toasting him tonight on his good fortune in being named courier to carry dispatches back to England. No small feather in his cap: a chance for advancement, a chance to attract official notice, and best of all, a chance to do it at home amid the comforts of a civilized country."

He lifted the larger of the two glasses from the tray and presented it to her in a hand that was not altogether steady. "So we shall toast him, too."

She took the glass and set it beside her on the washstand while he raised the other with a flourish that paid no heed to the wine splashing down his normally immaculate sleeve. "To our friend Robbins. May he enjoy to the full the opportunities that would have been mine except for one mistake: befriending a bitch even the lowest savages wouldn't keep anymore."

Bethany shrank aside as he downed the wine in one swallow and flung the glass over his shoulder. It smashed in a spray of fragments against the bedpost.

"What? You won't drink to that? When it was your little escapade on horseback that caused me to be passed over?" He seized her glass and thrust it into her hand. "What's more, some nasty rumors have come to General Proctor's ears so that he's asked to see you. The general's inclined to wink at private amusements that go on discreetly behind the scenes, but he comes down hard on irregularities that are brought into the open. Drink to that, damn you."

Bethany drank rather than provoke him further in this strange, wild mood. The wine had a peculiar off-taste to it—not the best of vintages, certainly—but nearly a third of it had been lost to spills, and she managed to drain what remained.

A flash of teeth in his foxlike smile approved her as she restored the empty glass to the washstand. "Good. We've come to the parting of the ways, you and I. Perhaps you would prefer to consider we just drank to that."

"Parting?" Her heart gave a jump that was midway between hope and a nameless apprehension. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that the loss of our squadron on Lake Erie has made it necessary to withdraw from Detroit, since your General Harrison has taken advantage of the situation to launch a march with Detroit obviously as its target. You will not accompany us. I am leaving you here."

She sprang to her feet. "It's over? You're letting me go?" She clutched at the chair back to conquer a curious wave of giddiness.

"I'm leaving you here."

Was it merely the effort to overcome the drunken slur in his articulation that made the repetition somehow chilling?

He had neglected to close the door behind him when he came in as he usually did. Bethany started for it on a run.

The trailing sheet tangled about her feet, and Francis's fingers bit into her shoulder. From somewhere he produced a loop of rope and pushed her hand through it. A jerk tightened it about her wrist and bent her arm painfully behind her. She lost the struggle to keep her other arm free, and it was quickly snubbed up to the first.

Francis picked her up and tossed her on the bed. She kicked at him, but her legs felt heavy and not quite coordinated, as if she were kicking in water. He captured one ankle, then the other in his length of rope, and she was suddenly immobilized and totally helpless.

"What are you going to do?" she asked as he turned from her to fumble for the candle on her windowsill.

It took him several attempts, but he finally struck a spark from the flint and steel lighter and got the candle lit. "I'm going to gather up the last of my belongings that haven't been packed and depart to toast Robbins long and roundly at his party."

He was fussing with the curtains now, drawing them nearly shut across the window and dangerously close to the candle flame. "And I am going to be astonished and properly grieved when they come to me with the news that this house is afire and you in it."

The rope cut into her wrists as she stiffened in horror.

"You aren't serious!"

But she could see by the candlelight what he had done: pinned the lower corners of the curtains across the base of the candle so that in a very little while, as the candle burned down, the flame was sure to ignite the fabric.

"I do regret this, but there seems no alternative. I thought once of selling you to Leighton for a handsome stake when I left for England, but he wouldn't have you now even as a gift. And I'm not going to England. You've become a liability, my dear, a frightful liability."

Bethany filled her lungs and let the air out in a piercing scream: "Annette! Please! Annette! Help!"

Francis poked and primped the curtains to a finer adjustment. "Scream if you must, but the house is closed up, and I doubt anyone will hear you. Annette has been discharged since early this morning when I sent her off lacking three months' wages on the grounds her service had not been satisfactory." He uttered a snort that might have been a laugh. "If there should be a question about this tragedy, what better candidate for suspicion than a disgruntled, vindictive housekeeper?"

Bethany could not believe it. He was actually smiling, inclining his head at her as if he expected applause for his cleverness.

"Annette knows I'm still here," she said desperately. "She wouldn't . . . And there are others. I have friends."

Francis strolled past her to the door.

"Your friends have been and gone. Her son-in-law, the seamstress's husband, and some Indian—probably a relative; Annette is kin to half the savages hereabouts, I gather. Monsieur Franc was in a stew about his *belle-mère's* wages and also said he had a message from his wife to you." He stood swaying slightly in the doorway. "He got short shrift. And you, I told him, had been sent for by the general and were in Sandwich."

"No!" The giddiness struck again, and the room, the candle flame, and the unsteady figure in the doorway went out of focus.

From a remote distance, fragments of his voice reached her: ". . . not inhumane . . . powder in the wine . . . sleep soon . . ."

Bethany clenched her teeth against the light-headedness that was already flattening into a seductive lethargy. When her vision cleared, Francis was gone. She could hear him opening and shutting drawers in the room across the hall.

Her eyes went to the candle flame. If she could inch close enough, she could blow it out. She began a writhing struggle to sit up. Her muscles were reluctant to respond. Her movements were sluggish like those in a bad dream.

And the candle burned unwinkingly lower.

She concentrated on rolling onto her side and pushing herself upright. The rope from her wrist to her ankles was too

short to allow her to sit naturally. She brought her knees up under her chin to slacken the tension.

Francis was descending the stairs. Leaving. The smell of scorching was beginning to rise from the curtains.

Frantically she hitched herself to the edge of the bed. As she moved, the loop around her left ankle tightened. Around the right ankle, it eased. She kicked, flexed her foot, twisted, kicked and flexed again. And she had one foot free.

With nothing now holding it taut, the second loop relaxed. Francis had been in no condition to tie knots that were well placed and secure. She dug her free heel into the loop, then her toes, working it wider until at last she could shake it off.

Drowsiness flooded her mind. For a moment she forgot what it was she must do next. The candle . . .

She stood up, weaving as drunkenly as Francis. Too late. The shadows in the room vanished in a burst of vivid light. Flames raced each other up the curtains, turning the window into a single sheet of fire.

Hands still bound behind her, the long rope trailing, Bethany started on a staggering run for the hall. Before she gained the door, the window frame was smoldering, a portion of fiery curtain lay on the rag rug below, and tiny curls of flame were licking at the chair rungs.

"Bethany!"

The shout came from downstairs. There was a commotion going on down there, but even through the swimming in her head and the shouts of other men, she knew the voice.

"Joshua!"

The rope end caught under the door. She seesawed back and forth, jerking at it.

The knot binding her wrists slid around into her palm. She plucked at it furiously with her fingertips. There was room to work her thumb beneath it. It was a slipknot. One more tug in the right direction and that hand was free. The rest of the clumsy bond loosened and fell away.

But it wasn't Joshua charging up the steep incline of the stairs to meet her. It was Francis. His face in the glare spilling from her bedroom was that of a madman.

"No," he yelled at sight of her. "Go back. Back!"

He aimed a pistol at her.

An object, a tomahawk, hurtled past his shoulder, just missing him. The blade imbedded itself in the stair rail.

Francis wheeled on the top step. He fired point-blank at the man directly below him. . . . Was it an Indian?

Bethany could not be sure in the explosion of powder smoke. Only that the man on the stairs was already falling backward, his face a crimson mask.

She did see the face of the second man who was lunging up the stairs. He too wore the garb of an Indian—but he was no Indian.

"Joshua!"

She screamed the name as Francis, gripping the pistol by the barrel, swung it up to smash the butt against Joshua's skull.

The blow never landed. She hurled herself at Francis, wrapping her weight around the lifted arm, dragging it down. His violent wrench to fling her off cost him his footing. He sidestepped into space. Together, he and Bethany pitched headlong and downward.

Strong arms caught her before she struck the bottom. The arms lifted and carried her past two sprawled figures at the foot of the stairs. Smoke was billowing into the lower hall, and it was hard to draw a breath.

She wanted to ask if Francis was dead. But the last drop of energy seemed to have been drained from her.

They were in the kitchen. Something soft was being wrapped around her nakedness: the kitchen curtains. Joshua was repeating her name, asking insistently, "Are you hurt?"

"No. Don't know," she summoned the will to answer. "Drugged . . ." The effort ended in a spasm of coughing. Smoke was thickening fast.

Next she was in the fresh evening air outside. A small farm wagon stood at the back gate. Joshua lifted her into it onto a bed of straw.

She was terrified when he turned and ran into the house again. Flames were darting long banners through the upstairs windows, blackening the white clapboards, and snatching at the shingles of the roof. A ruddy glow was shining from the downstairs windows.

But even terror was dulled by her waning power to fend off

sleep. Vaguely, she heard shouts up the street: neighbors rousing to the peril and rallying to fight it.

Her last clear impression was of the braided rug from the kitchen being thrown over her, and Joshua, gasping to free his lungs of smoke, whipping up the horse to get the wagon under way.

Chapter XXII

Bethany woke in a bed hung with red curtains at the side of a room that was a bustle of activity. At the fireplace, Annette was removing loaves of bread from the oven with a wooden paddle. A barefoot boy of about ten in loose trousers and a homespun shirt was stacking wood beside her. Madame Franc sat at the table, paring apples and vainly shushing the excited account being delivered to her in shrill French by a somewhat younger child.

"*Et bien*, now he has wake you," she cried, jumping up as Bethany moved the curtains a little farther apart to be sure she was not dreaming. "He is so full of it, my Claude, he cannot stop talking. He watch *les Anglais* march out of the town this morning and go away."

"They're really gone?" Bethany asked.

Madame Franc nodded. "All of them gone. And tomorrow or the next day the American troops, they will be here to take command."

"This is your farm?"

"*Oui*, yes. You were so sound asleep when he bring you here in our wagon last night, you never knew a thing. Drugged, he said. That pig of a major."

He. That must be Joshua. "Where is he now? Is he here?"

Madame Franc shook her head, at the same time waving off Claude, who was crowding in beside her for a stare at the stranger in his parents' bed. "He and my man, Jean-Baptiste, they went into town again to see what they could learn. Today with *les Anglais* gone it is safe, but yesterday we try to tell him he may be arrested to do that. But after Mama came to us, he is like a wildcat to be off, and all we can do is to make him to dress like an Indian and hide him in the straw in the wagon Jean-Baptiste drives. Then he must still wait in the wagon until dark while Jean-Baptiste go across the river to look for you in Sandwich, and so it is that he is watching with

Mama's key to the house in his hand when you put the candle in your window that is your signal."

The candle Francis had lighted last night—not she.

Bethany closed her eyes against the memory. At once Madame Franc was all concern, shooing the boys out of the house, bringing her a dipper of cool water, while Annette, clucking softly, offered her customary defense against most ills: a thick slice of new bread yellow with butter and a generous chunk of pale cheese.

"No, no, you must lie still and rest until you feel quite strong," Madame Franc insisted as Bethany, pleased to discover herself clad in a modestly high-necked and long-sleeved nightgown, tried to sit up straighter. "He will skin me alive, that man of yours, if I don't take every care of you."

Once persuaded, however, that aside from two or three purpling bruises from her fall downstairs and rope burns on her ankles and wrists, Bethany was feeling remarkably rested and restored, Madame triumphantly brought forth a petticoat and blue-checked gown of her own which she had hastily altered to Bethany's proportions earlier in the morning.

"Not so fine a job as I could do in more time," she apologized, "but it will serve."

More than serve, Bethany reflected as she completed the ensemble by tucking her feet into a pair of prettily beaded moccasins. She savored the sensation of being both decently and attractively clothed again after so long. For Madame Franc, it would seem, could not put needle to fabric without imparting a certain flare and charm to the result.

There was ample testimony to this in the forthright appreciation with which not only Joshua but Jean-Baptiste, too, took in Bethany's appearance when they returned.

"Did I not tell you she is *très jolie*?" Madame Franc laughed, not in the least put out to find her husband in full agreement. "But the news, tell us. What is the talk in town?"

"They uncover two bodies from the ashes," said Jean-Baptiste, as long and sinewy as his wife was small and plump. "One is the English major, the other, they say, an Indian perhaps. I am able to say yes, I know this Indian I think, and that I will tell his relatives the Potawatomi to carry his body away for proper burial."

"Ah, *bien*!" Annette nodded in approval. "*Bien*."

Bethany's eyes sought Joshua's, but she needed no one to confirm the Indian's identity.

A kind man. A good man. A brave man. There was no shame in having been the wife of Little Hawk. And no falsity in her sorrow at his loss.

"I wouldn't have left him to the fire," Joshua said, "but I couldn't get back in through the smoke." His features were stern with the memory.

Jean-Baptiste shrugged expressively. "A quarrel it must have been, they are saying. Perhaps over money owed. The English major was a man of many debts. A candle, a lamp perhaps, is knock over in the fight. The major kill the Indian. But by then the smoke, the fire, is too much. He cannot find his way out."

"His body was just inside the front door," Joshua said to Bethany's inquiring glance. "He got that far. But I wouldn't waste much pity on him if I were you."

Pity? Unconsciously, Bethany fingered the red marks on her wrists. It would be many a long year before she could feel anything as tender as pity for Francis Ainsley. She could not be sorry he was dead. Yet there was a degree of relief in knowing it was not she who had killed him.

"It is a blessing that only the house and not the whole town burn down like it did the year I buy this farm," Jean-Baptiste said, pressing tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. "Someone say to me they must search farther for the young lady who stay in that house too. But I tell them how yesterday the major tell me she is sent across the river by order of General Proctor, so there is no need."

He waved his pipe expansively to emphasize his cleverness and smiled around at the listening faces, focusing last on Bethany's. "And that is the end of that."

The end, and the beginning, Bethany thought. The miracle that she was safe and among friendly people who wished her only well had begun to seep through the incredulity in her mind and heart.

That afternoon she and Joshua walked together in the orchard. He carried a leather-bound case under his arm.

"I thought you might like to examine this in private," he said, handing it to her when they reached the farther edge of the orchard. "I don't know why I picked it up on my last

dash out of the house except it was lying there on the table where Ainsley had been caressing it when we broke in on him. There's money in it, more than enough to pay Annette her back wages. But it's the letters I suspect will interest you most."

They were letters from Christiana. Over a dozen of them, written to Francis from before the time of her marriage to Phillips Herbert on through the years to one penned barely three weeks ago. All were outpourings of love, schemes for overcoming the difficulties that kept him apart from her, reminiscences of intimacies shared. The last of her letters referred exultantly to his expected appointment as courier and pledged full consent to the proposal in his last letter: that she join him before he sailed and return to England with him.

Bethany sat on a grassy mound beneath an apple tree and read until she had scanned as much as she could stomach.

Despite his show of cynicism, Francis must never have been quite free of his cousin's spell. Everything was here—even a letter that outlined possible approaches toward his courting of Bethany with an eye to acquiring her inheritance, should Francis come to Boston.

"How I wish I could lay these out in front of my father," Bethany said quietly. "And I should like to see Christiana's face."

Joshua, who had been pacing up and down while she was reading, came to stand beside her in the sun-dappled shade under the tree.

"If that's your heart's desire, I don't see any great obstacle in the way of achieving it. It can be arranged."

No longer any obstacle to her going where she pleased?

Bethany slipped the letters back into their case as she savored the idea. If a return to Boston was *not* what she would describe as her heart's desire, it did have its practical aspects—as well as offering the sweetness of revenge.

"My inheritance is there, waiting for me. If I—"

She stopped, dismayed by a recollection.

"The ring. Virgil's ring. It's the only proof I had that I was married. And it's lost somewhere in the ashes of the house."

He dropped down next to her on the grass. "Ah, yes. The conditions for gaining your independence were that you must lose it."

"Or wait until I'm twenty-one. But that's another two-and-a-half years."

Bethany was keenly aware of his nearness even as her mind turned over pictures of herself sifting through charred timbers and ash for a tiny circle of gold that had probably ceased to exist.

But his suggestion, lazy and half amused, caught her by surprise: "It might be simpler to take a second husband."

"Do what?"

She flung her head up, intending a glare, but the eyes that met hers were quizzically intent and of an unfathomable blue. He was not laughing.

On an indrawn breath, she said, "You?"

He raised one shoulder in a shrug. The other shoulder, as she had observed, was still a trifle stiff and not fully recovered from his sojourn in jail. "Not for the sake of your fortune, I assure you. But I've tried laying claim to you by every other means I can think of—including outright purchase—without much lasting success. Matrimony seems the only course left."

Bethany was undecided whether to laugh or to shake him.

The hand she lifted was imprisoned at once in a clasp that gave the lie to his wry tone. Looking down at their interlaced fingers, she said carefully, "I won't be sorry for it if you're sure you won't be."

He could not resist a flash of the old, satirical grin. "On the contrary. I'm sure there'll be any number of times I'll be heartily sorry, and so will you." But his hand tightened its hold on hers. "I'm willing to risk it if you are. Tomorrow, if you've no scruples against being married by a French priest. Or whenever, however, you say."

A trio of yellow leaves fluttered down on them from the branches overhead to touch his hair, her cheek, their hands.

What she said, what brought his arms hard around her and his mouth on hers, what she had deferred saying at his cabin the previous winter until it was too late, was: "Joshua, I love you."

And so it was that before noon of the next day, while General Harrison and his troops were marching into Detroit to reestablish the sovereignty of the United States over the Northwest Territory, Bethany Herbert Kimbrough and Joshua

Randolph Stark knelt together on the stone floor of a sunny farmhouse kitchen and repeated after an aging, black-robed priest the vows that made them man and wife.

It was two days more before Bethany found the time or inclination to look at Christiana's letters again.

She spread them on Madame Franc's table, freshly scrubbed after the midday meal. Her mind was still full of the bright plans she and Joshua were making for their honeymoon trip: to Boston first to renew old acquaintances and attend to her affairs, then on to Virginia to reestablish ties with Joshua's relatives and see to property claims of his, and in the spring, as they were both emphatically agreed, to journey west again to rebuild his trading interests. And to create a comfortable and permanent home.

Poor Christiana. Whatever her flaws, her letters testified that her love for Francis Ainsley had been passionately real. How would it be when she learned that the one man she had truly loved and desired was gone forever? What pain could be inflicted on her, or any other woman in love, that was more absolute?

Bethany turned the dainty wedding ring that Joshua, to her delighted surprise, had produced at the appropriate moment in the ceremony to slip onto her finger. He would be here beside her soon. She could hear him laughing with Jean-Baptiste just beyond the door.

Rising to her feet, she gathered up Christiana's damning letters. She carried them to the fireplace, where she fed them to the flames one by one.



Forced to flee Boston rather than marry a man she does not love, Bethany Herbert rides westward to seek a new life on the American frontier. She quickly discovers how protected she has been from the harsh realities of life—and from men who demand far more than a flirtatious smile and a discreet kiss.

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